

# **Christmas Road Trip to Southern Spain**

This is the full version of our family Blog which documents our first ever trip in a Motorhome. Here we describe our adventure from Kent to Rojales in Spain via Calais and back home again via Bilbao over Christmas, stopping off at various places on the way. Apart from the prelude and some very minor edits, this document is a copy of exactly what was written at the time it happened.

The story begins shortly after we took delivery of our new Motorhome and sees us teach ourselves all we need to know to safely and successfully travel more than 2,000 miles on a maiden journey as complete and, some say, foolish novices. The original version can be seen at <http://fegosontour.blogspot.com>

## **Who are we?**

We are a family of 6 living in Kent, UK. Our children are aged 4, 10, 15 and 16 and we are all on our way to Spain to spend Christmas with the Grandparents.

## **What are we travelling in?**



Bessacarr E495 2.8 JDT Fiat

## **When?**

Christmas 2006

## **Contact Us:**

Please feel free to contact us using [kfegan@gmail.com](mailto:kfegan@gmail.com) if you have any questions to ask or advice to offer.

**Copyright protected – not for sharing without prior written permission of K Fegan**

## Prelude

Lest we forget, our experience of motorhoming at the time was zero. The closest we had come to any relevant experience was the test drive of the motor home we actually bought and owning a static caravan. We had always commented on what good fun motorhomes must be every time we saw people enjoying one, but we never had a plan to buy one. We definitely never thought our first trip out in one would be to the south of Spain to see my parents and not in a million years did we think we would also subject our four children to the stupidity of such an outing.

But, one day, over a boring November weekend, we wandered onto a Motorhome sales forecourt and started poking our noses around these wonderful machines. Suddenly, owning a caravan with an inboard motor seemed like the one thing missing in our lives and a drive to see the grandparents 1,500 miles away seemed like a great way to spend Christmas. Although it sounded like a longish drive, we were certain it would be fun and didn't, not for a second, think it might be challenging or that we wouldn't find it easy. As the paragraphs below testify, we were, well, a bit wrong really...

## Getting Prepared - 1<sup>st</sup> December 2006

We are about 2 weeks away from setting off now. The Ferry has been booked and the grandparents have been warned that we are coming for Christmas!

We are now working on the route (importantly where we are going to stop overnight), testing the equipment in the M/H and planning what we need to take with us. We are also taking advice from more experienced M/H owners who have done this before to make sure we don't end up making a silly mistake we could easily have avoided.



Our route will take into account nice views and hopefully avoid expensive toll roads.

### **It's just not cricket** - 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2007

I'm very surprised to see the England team doing better than us right now. I thought they'd be the ones in trouble...



As usual, I've left most things until the last minute having adopted the 'it'll sort itself out' attitude. With only 16 days to go however, I'm quickly realising that there's actually quite a lot that won't sort itself out.

For example, the route. How do we get there and what do we do on the way? Now, we've been to the grandparent's house before, but that was 2 years ago and it was by plane. And we were collected and dropped off at the airport.

I've recruited some help. I've got a Tom Tom and today we bought Auto Route 2007 with integrated 'thingy' that helps you know where you are. Problem is, the Grandparents (or 'Olds' as we like to call them) address isn't on either! Hmmm! Nice. I thought they could help me, but being the 'Olds', they don't even know where they live. Their address is also a PO Box so this really is going to be a challenge. We've (sort of) arranged for us to get as close as we can to them (they live somewhere near Rojasles) and then we'll ring them and meet up (at least that's the plan; they are rubbish with phones and never have the mobile switched on because no one ever rings apparently).

Anyway, the route there is the easy part because we at least have a choice of which way to go. There are tonnes of other things we don't have a choice with however and it's now dawning on us how hard this 'holiday' might end up being. We have, after all got the extremes of children; an easily bored 4 year old boy and a terminally bored 16 year old boy. In between we have got typical 10 and 15 year old girls.

As we have never stayed in a Motor Home, we had a pilot sleepover on the drive the other day. Nightmare. The 4 year old wanted to be on his own and so did the 16 year old but the girls were happy to be together. After a couple of hours trying to sort it out, the 16 year old

was evicted back indoors and the rest of us sweated it out. I left the heating on too high so that's another thing I need to master.

Back to today. We had a run out to test the Auto Route and its tracker thingy and set it to take us to a local pub. We were also testing the new alarm/immobilizer and reversing camera we had fitted. At first the engine wouldn't start because apparently I spent more than a minute trying after which the immobilizer does its thing. When we finally got underway, we were distracted by the Martian sounding voice of AutoRoute blurting out from our laptop with its directions. It doesn't say go left or right, it says things like 'take the exit to the B2289' which is fine if you know where you are going and are familiar with the road names, but even on my local jolly, I managed to misinterpret the instructions. It's early days, but I'd say the Tom Tom is gonna be better although if I ever do work out a route, I shall have the problem of programming it into the Tom Tom.

Me and Mrs. F are going to try out the 'first floor' bed tonight. That's the one above the cab. The kids can enjoy the warmth of the house tonight. In the last attempt at organising who sleeps where, we all sort of ended up in a pile so this will be an attempt to see if that bed works for us.

"We" bought a load more gear today. According to Mrs. F we need it. I'm getting paranoid about the weight though and keep picking up that Haynes manual to try and work out whether I've got anything to worry about. Every page I turn however just gives me something else to add to my list of things to work out or do.

Tomorrow I have the treat of emptying the dunny for the first time. We haven't been anywhere in the MH yet so have only used it for novelty purposes and as everyone who pops rounds seems to want to share the novelty, I reckon I will have a fairly ferocious cocktail to dispose of. Nice. No wonder I haven't rushed to tick that box yet.

Other things to try out for the first time include opening the awning, attaching the gas bottles, firing up the cooker (both gas and lekky), starting the fridge (I seem to have a choice of resource there) get the telly working, try the water heater, empty the so called grey water and (jeez, I'm shaking at the thought) exposing one of us, me probably, to the shower.

Logic says these should all be road tested on my drive rather than in some lay-by in France so that's the plan for the next few days.

## **The First Night 'Upstairs'...** - 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2006



We survived the first night 'upstairs' although it wasn't the greatest night out I've ever had it must be said.

Firstly, we made sure the kids were all in bed then, looking like saddo's, we wandered onto the drive with a bottle of wine, a newspaper, some munchies, a kettle full of water and some fresh milk ready to settle in for the

night.

Now, anyone in the UK last night will know that it wasn't the wisest choice of evening to kick off our upstairs experience. The wind was howling like a jumbo jet and the rain was coming down sideways. All in all, a pretty challenging environment for a stay in a van. The vehicle was rocking from side to side and with the amount of water around, it really did feel like a boat. (note to self: must investigate the things they call 'steadies').

Anyhoo, the first thing we did was blow up a Spiderman bed which we hope our 4 year old will use. (Mrs. F surprisingly didn't agree with me that the TV should come first). We decided on the blow up bed following the nightmare first attempt to squeeze us all in a couple of weeks ago. That was fine and will form a good bed for him in between the two beds for the girls in the lounge area we think, but we will still need to try that out first (another box still to tick therefore).

The next thing was to get the TV working of course. It did work and I did get a decent enough picture from throttling the aerial pole for ages just in time to catch the end of Parky. We had just sat down when the cab alarm went off (or is that on?) which risked alerting our neighbours to the fact we were actually in our van on our drive after 11pm; that's if they hadn't already spotted us creeping out earlier.

Of course, this was the first time we had been in the van since having the alarm fitted and although I had been given very clear instructions on the alarm and immobilizer and its 'passive' functions, that was, well

days ago and at this exact point in time, I couldn't remember what he said and what to do. I got it to stop wailing easy enough, but then the light started flashing again, first green the red. Then when we moved about it went off again. AAARRRRRGGGH!! I found the so called manual and spent the next 45 minutes or so working out what to do. Even then, I wasn't convinced it wouldn't keep going off all night which was I think was the genesis of what turned out to be a very restless night.

When we were happy that the alarm was set properly, pet setting they call it, we decided to venture to the first floor. Of course, everything is stored up there so we had to somehow move everything past us into a free space so we could get up there. Not the sort of gymnastics we had in mind really. Then we had to get changed and get in bed. Then I had to get out. And then again. And then again. First to turn the heating down; I had it set at 2000w and the fan was too noisy at number 4. Secondly, on instructions, to go check on the children (jeez it was 10'clock by then) and finally to turn the heating up again; I think I shall have to cede that role to someone more capable than me.

So, by about 1.15am, I was ready for some kip, but the safety net wouldn't stay up. I must have bumped my head a thousand times trying to make those straps stick. I finally got them to double wrap and they stayed in place. Head on pillow, I was surprised how much room we had and how comfy it was. If only the rain didn't give us the impression the fire brigade were outside hosing us down. If only the wind wasn't so loud. And if only the security light on our drive didn't keep lighting us up like Regent's Street, then maybe I would have slept more soundly, or at all for that matter. Mrs.F was fine and had a restful night and thinks the first floor is the place for us. Course, she didn't spend ages going up and down like a yo-yo or have the worry of falling out like I did so maybe my view is tainted. We'll see.

At about 3.30, I had that feeling about me that you get when you go to a really crap party. You know, if I left now, would it still count as actually having been there all the time? Will anyone think badly of me if I leave now? In the party timescale, I estimated that I was at about the 9.15pm stage which is way too early to wimp out, so I decided to wait until there was a slither of daylight emerging. At about 6.59 therefore, we left the party and convinced ourselves that we had actually been there for the full stretch, but in reality, we left way before the host was even given the bumps and went indoors and back to (our proper) bed with a cup of tea.



After a long bath and lots of eye rubbing, I'm now getting down to the task of planning the route. I've heard lots of horror stories about being gassed at 'Aires' but been told I should survive if I stay at an 'Aire de Service'. Hmmm. I'll keep that detail to meself I think.

Once I've mastered the route, I'll be back out in the rain testing all the appliances. Testing, by the way, is code for sussing out how they actually work because right now, I don't know one end of my leisure battery from the other end of my reverse polarity...

### **Planning the route and testing stuff** - 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2006



I've been working on the route. It was much more difficult than I expected and took far longer than Mrs.F thought it should have. Anyway, this is what I came up with so far:

Calais to Reims via A26, then down to stop overnight somewhere near Troyes (we thought we ought to park up whilst it's still light). Then Troyes down to Chablis via Auxerre (N77 -> D91 then to Burgundy (A6 -> E607 -> A62) for another stop overnight somewhere. Then A62 -> A71 -> A75 to Clemont Ferrand which I hope takes us over the big bridge? Another stop here. Next day down to Barcelona A75 -> A9 -> Ap7 -> C33 -> C31 stopping somewhere west of Barcelona. Then the C32 -> Ap7/E15 -> V21 into Valencia followed by A7 to Murcia arriving at my parents in time for tea :-)

I will still have to find out where to stop and I imagine that will take me too long too!

I've become a member of a Motorhome Owners' website. Very handy and very helpful people. I'm sure some of them must be squirming at what I am planning to do and how I'm going about it though. The website is <http://www.motorhomefacts.com/> and it costs a tenner a year to be a member but I'd wager it's fantastic value and well worth a visit. I put a post up there about my trip and have received lots of messages of support and help as a result.

See <http://www.motorhomefacts.com/ftopic-21282.html>



This afternoon, I have been testing all the appliances. I connected the gas first and then tested the cooker, the fridge (how can a fridge run on burnt gas?) and then tried out the heating. It was very complicated and being a bloke I simply tried to work it out for meself instead of reading the instructions. Mrs.F hit me with the instructions and 5 minutes later we were roasting. It then took me 25 minutes to work out how to turn it off. I took the plastic cover for what I thought was the boiler exhaust off on the outside but have no idea if that was right or wrong. Either way, it worked although I couldn't work out if fumes were coming out or air was being dragged in.

Next, I mucked about with the reverse camera. Not sure I actually 'need' one, but I like toys and my mate fits them for a living so I convinced meself (and importantly Mrs.F) that it was essential. When we went for a quick out yesterday, I kept saying things like 'thank god I bought that reversing camera' to kind of justify it. So far that's been good enough for Mrs.F but I better watch out how often I keep saying it or I might actually start believing it too. Anyway, this camera is very good and my mate was a bit naughty because he wired it up so it works whenever I want it to (not just whilst in reverse). He also fitted extra cables so if I wanted to, I could watch a DVD on the go.



Whilst the quality is excellent, including at night, the standard settings make the screen too light so a bit of tampering by yours truly and its virtually HD ready! In the process, I completely mucked everything up



several times of course courtesy of yet more male instruction manual denial (at one point the instructions were in Punjabi) but in the end I was pleased to have invested the time. I found out, for example, that you can reverse and/or invert the picture (how that would help gawd knows) and that it has loads of games built into it for those moments when texting whilst driving just isn't dangerous enough for you. The most crazy and over engineered part of it, however, is its remote control. Er, why? And it's so small that I bet I'll lose it before Christmas.



Next up for the Fego treatment was the awning. I thought this would be easy and in fact hadn't even planned to try it out, after all, we're unlikely to be needing this winter. I was on a roll though and couldn't help myself. It took me about three minutes before I was regretting it. I got that mid Channel crossing moment swimmers get. I got halfway and wanted to stop but whether I carried on to open or returned to close was just as much of an effort. I persevered and was ultimately successful although I did end up with a load of spare bits and it did take me three attempts before the 'red bits' disappeared per the instructions which I have a growing respect for now. I wish the dealer had spent a few moments with me on this.



Finally, I ventured into the smallest closet and removed the bog's cassette. It was a first for me and the van and I was surprised by two things; first how heavy it was and second how easy and un-messy it was emptying it down the khazi indoors. I'm not sure if I did the right thing emptying it down the toilet, but I don't see I had any choice; I could hardly leave it in there any longer or bung it over the fence, could I? It wasn't the highlight of my weekend it has to be said, but it wasn't as awful as I expected either. Pressing all the buttons on the cassette whilst emptying it seemed to help although I don't really know why.

The last chore of the day, at least relating to the MH anyway, was to put the cover on it. As we all know, the weather is right cak at the moment and as we wont be using the van this week, we took advantage of the cloth garage we had chosen to invest in. I dunno



about other people's experiences, but in my case, every time I have tried to drag that bleeding thing over the hulk of the vehicle's structure, I have lost my patience and given myself a good telling off for buying the bloody thing in the first place. If I hadn't bought it, I wouldn't have to use it, but since I have it, I feel obliged to gift wrap it.

I've only successfully completed the simultaneous marathon stretch, pull, lift and drag three times. The first time it ended up being on back to front of course and during the subsequent attempts, it ended up on the floor at least twice.

This is a three person job and it's far worse than having to do the dishes. The cloth itself its soaking wet and invariably covered in dirty stuff. It would be extremely benevolent to suggest that I have mastered the knack of putting this cover on, but for what it's worth, our 'routine' involves one on the left holding a strap attached to the bottom left rear corner, one similarly placed on the right and one (always me) in the middle underneath the fabric with an extended window cleaner pole pushing towards the unsee-able stars.

The cover always gets stuck on the chimney bit or the aerial or both which means having to get up a step ladder at some point. In all, it takes about 30 minutes (including attaching and adjusting the straps), so it's not something even worth considering taking with you. BTW, the straps are a bit rubbish (two have already broken) but if you don't put lots of them on, the whole thing comes of and ends up down the road. It's bad enough asking for your ball back from your neighbours, let alone a very bulky piece of grey cloth.

So, with the caravan car safely tucked up and much progress made towards planning our maiden voyage, time to celebrate my enhanced knowledge with a cold glass of something.

Tomorrow, I've got to put my mind towards finding actual places to stop according to our planned route. Mrs. F won't let me chance it and I don't want to be left feeling unprepared either.

### **Planning where to stop is not easy, no sir.** - 4<sup>th</sup> December 2006



I've had a surreal time today trying to find a safe and comfortable place for our first stop over. I thought that if I invested a couple of hours in just the first stop, I'd at least make Mrs.F feel a bit happier knowing that a lot of research had been dedicated to finding the best possible place for our first overnight experience. Looks like I might have to wait a bit longer before trying to install any such confidence, however.

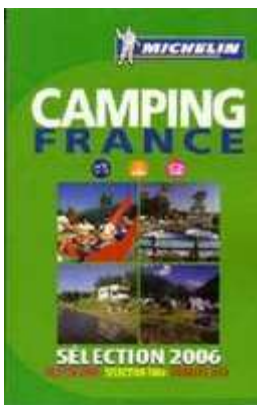
I decided to find a campsite with services for a M/H (or Camping Car as I've learned they say en France) sort of near the Troyes region. This will give us the requisite time to quaff and buy the liquid of fizzy dreams in Reims but still be able to arrive and settle in before it gets dark. I didn't think our first night should be gambled on finding a suitable Aire. Clever me eh? I started with the Caravan club; they

simply said all their sites are now closed and couldn't help me, but they still sold me a book containing details of all of those closed sites. Who's the clever one now eh?

If I'm honest, I was disappointed with the help I got from the Caravan Club. First of all, the website would only show me sites AFTER I booked them and I could only book them if I also booked a ferry too. I've already booked the ferry and I don't have any idea what site is what or even where they are in relation to where I am going. I pointed all this out and was told that the 'web people' would look into it. No matter what I did or what they told me to do, I couldn't get any info on any site in France or Spain from the website. Not exactly sure why I joined now.



As the book of closed sites won't arrive for a few days, I decided to exploit the value of utility and went into a book shop. Isn't it kind of them to provide leather sofas for you to relax on and read their books free of charge so you can find out what you need then leave without paying? Unfortunately, however, after 30 minutes of sitting and flicking, I was reaching the piss-taking stage and getting severe evils from the cashiers. The only useful book they had there was 'Camping France' by Michelin and it was so complicated for the first 30 minutes of flicking that I had no choice but to buy it. Another 11 quid on top of the 10 lifted from me by the Caravan Club.



Back in my office, I phoned a couple of sites I found in the the Michelin guide book but they were closed too (even though the book said they'd be open). So I rang the Tourist office in Troyes who didn't speak any English but gave me the number of a site they thought was open. I phoned the site but the guy didn't speak much English, certainly not enough for me to work out exactly where he is, but enough to know that he is open and he is now expecting me to turn up on the 18th Dec. Somehow I had to work out who I spoke to, whether they can provide the comfort level acceptable to Mrs.F, where the hell it is and whether it's convenient to our route, failing which I'd have to find another play to stay. I decided to ask for help and put up a post on the Motorhome facts website hoping someone might recognise the place.

I also surfed the net and looked up as much info as I could find about 'Aires'. Seems the best thing I can do is get me hands on a publication called 'Guide Officiel des Aires de Services Camping-car (MODEL107)' I did that from the same website making the recommendation and was immediately relieved of another 8 quid.

At roughly the same time that I realised how brilliant I am at being sold books to, I had a reply to my request for help on the website and was sent a link to the site I had rung earlier. It looks like it could meet 'our' requirements, but I sent them an email to double check the details I jotted down during my woeful conversation earlier. I was pleased to see a reply when I got home wishing me 'good travels' and pointing me to their website. I didn't tell Mrs. F that the websites claims "It is a halt privileged for all the tourists of passage who increasingly many become accustomed", I just showed her the video from the site which shows the rooms and breakfast which she may call on if needs be. Presently, her only concerns seem to be to ensure the children survive and that there will always be a hairdryer on tap! She doesn't seem to see how difficult this really is and how I'd probably find it easier and more familiar to be teaching Russian to tortoises.



Anyway, today's progress to report is that I have booked our first ever stopover. Well, when I say 'booked', I don't actually mean booked. There's been no exchange of funds (in fact I haven't got a Danny how much it's gonna cost) and I haven't received anything resembling a receipt with check-in instructions. What I mean is that there is a place somewhere near where we think we are going that might be able to offer us what we think we need. Being greener than green tomatoes at this motor touring lark, I've no idea if I will be satisfied with or chastised for the selection I've ending up making. Either way, step one is now on the plan so it's time to get on with all the other things still left to do.

The rest of this week looks like it is going to be just a difficult and time consuming, but at least I'm still learning stuff and enjoying the challenge which is what this all about. The biggest thing I need to do still is to actually commit my 'list' into list form. Currently it's still in my head and I can't help thinking that I might miss something if I don't have a checklist to physically tick off everyday.

PS. If anyone hasn't shifted any books recently and thinks I'm a soft target, please let me know what other books I need...

### **Scoffing a Big Slice of Reality Cake** - 5<sup>th</sup> December 2006



Apart from updating the blog, most of last night was spent wrestling the French campsite guide book I bought yesterday. I swear you need a qualification in Origami to extract any useful information from this book. Other essentials include a decent paperweight, a pen and pad and an endless supply of post it notes. You also need to have a fair amount of knowledge of roughly where you are trying to go and try to find a stop on your route which suits your timetable. You need to assemble several snippets of info found across several pages before any of it makes any sense at all. Maybe I just need to try harder? Maybe I just need to face the reality that creating a perfect route might not actually be possible and start putting effort into something else now instead.

As I was giving more thought to my trip this morning, three things struck me as I battled to the office on my motorbike in the appalling weather. The first thing to strike me was a windscreen wiper unit that had unloaded itself from the car in front as it furiously tried to wipe the screen dry. Not just the rubber bit, the whole unit, arm and everything hit me full on the chest and gave me a right jump. This strike enforced the reality that anything can happen at anytime to anyone. As a former claims handler, I should have known that already.



The second thing to strike me was the weather. It was so bad this morning that it made me 20 minutes late even though I gave myself 15 minutes contingency. Aside from the physical soaking that struck me, so did the realisation that if I encounter bad weather on my trip and fail to make one of my carefully planned stops as a result, then I'm knackered without a plan B.



The final strike was seeing a road sign flashing with the message 'M25 - Long Delays J4 to J12'. Now, I'm not an M25

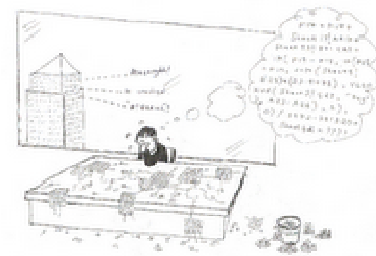


expert, but even I know that's a long queue. So, it occurred to me that if I am as unlucky on my trip as the thousands of commuters I sped past this morning were, the evils of bad weather and traffic could combine to enforce the use of a plan C which I'm nowhere near compiling.

I am conscious, therefore, that I might be trying to over plan the plan at the risk of not actually being able to stick to it. I've given it a lot of thought and have received some helpful advice from more experienced owners using my post. My view now is that as I've little idea of what I'm in for, the comprehensive plan still seems the way to go for me as a starter so I will still try to find stopovers all the way and book them in advance. I can always make changes to my plan as my confidence and knowledge grows although I must bear in mind that there are two aspects I can't change and that is the fact I need to be in Rojales before Christmas Day and be in Bilbao by midday on the 29th. By giving me 4 days to get down there and another 2 to get to Bilbao, we might actually find time to enjoy ourselves too.

I did start making that list of things I need to do but then made the mistake of also trying to do the things on the list as I wrote them down. For example, I know I need to get an EHIC certificate thingy from somewhere, so put that on the list whilst simultaneously clicking websites to get one. Easy, fill out a form and its done. I thought

Google's Autofill feature would do that for me. Oh no, that's disabled on the site so I had to put all our details in it handraulically.



I soon realised that I couldn't submit my request because I need all of our National Insurance numbers. So now I have added 'find out all of our National Insurance numbers' to my list. I've then had to cross reference that to the EHIC thingy on the list so that I know what to do with the numbers when I find them. And then I've emailed myself a reminder just in case. In all, therefore, I think I am better off having an almighty list creation session before I try to do anything else. That will be tonight's joy in between watching the footy of course.

By the way, I found out today that despite congratulating myself for operating the gas heater the other day, I had in fact managed to successfully heat up the water boiler instead. I'm only grateful that I was equally negligent at emptying the water boiler tank thus avoiding major self harm to the boiler. I really do have a growing respect for



the user guides and finding where those guides are, is now on my list of things to do.

### **Getting a bit worried now** - 6<sup>th</sup> December 2006



Another night of disappointment. Not only because Liverpool lost again, but mostly because I didn't manage yet again to get on with that list. The task of documenting everything I need to do before I can even contemplate taking 4 children and a wife on a 1,000 mile road trip was doomed the second I opened the box containing my latest toy; a video recorder! I thought we needed one (like we needed the reversing camera) so I bought an 'entry level' model from Superdrug of all places and spent most of last night mucking about with it. I wasted at least half an hour before reminding myself about the user manual thing and after that it got a lot easier. It only cost 70 quid and so far, I'm well chuffed with it. Of course, it's only got 32mb of memory but you can increase that to 1gb by adding a SD card. The nearest rival I could find was in Curry's at £249!

Anyway, I thought it would be great fun to record a daily video diary of where we are, how we are getting on, what we have been up to and how we are feeling. So far, I haven't been able to upload a movie file yet, but I'm sure I'll get around that and soon be updating you with moving pictures.

Back to that list. It's still worrying me. There are now things on there (or there would be if it existed) which require urgent attention, otherwise I will run out of time. For example, there are a few bits I need to buy still and Ebay sits waiting, but if I don't get on with ordering them soon, I know I'll have to make another expensive trip to the caravan outlet and/or Halfords. What worries me more though are the things I don't have that I don't know I need yet. There's bound to be some which hopefully I can pick up on the way.

I've been receiving a surprising amount of email from people willing to offer advice. I haven't received any bad advice yet (although obviously I wouldn't know one way or the other), so I am very, very grateful. It is odd to think that buying a Motor Home was only an idea created by my wife about a month ago. We went full in at the deep end without

any research at all other than in relation to which model van suited us best and thereafter ensuring we got a good deal for it. We never once considered there would be so much to think about and learn and maybe after this trip we won't think there ever was a lot to worry about or learn. However, right now, 12 days before we leave to drive on roads and stay at places we didn't even know existed, it seems like we have an awful lot to learn still. It's a combination of excitement and fear like a strangely concocted 50p mixed bag.



I've spent ages on the website forum. There is mention of lots of other resources for information on other sites, but presently I can't even cope with the information download from just one site let alone others. Every question I have ever asked has been answered, typically within an hour. I wish I had that sort of resource available in my business life. The help I've received has made me feel far more comfortable about the safety of the stops I intend to make although I got a bit confused earlier about whether a place was being recommended or not. I've asked another question.

I will definitely get on with that list tonight. I've got no choice. The one factor which still taunts me however and which will dominate the final content of the list is weight. I've learned that the E495 doesn't have great payload and although Mrs.F thinks I'm mental for keep waffling on about it, I know we are going to have to be careful, very careful. It isn't helped that I can't find a weighbridge near me to prove my point. More on that another time.

### **Video Arrives (sort of)** - 7<sup>th</sup> December 2006



The list is still in a temporary hiatus thanks to a broken washing machine suffered by the Fego household last night. Not terribly good timing I have to say, but then again when would be a good time for your washing machine to croak it? Despite the deafening noise it was making and ignoring the fact I am no more qualified to repair washing machines than I am to host Motorhome tours, I couldn't help getting my tool box out and diving underneath the worktop and into the small gap to see what I could do. Obviously, there was nothing I could do other than make a mess which I spent two hours championing. Mrs.F was chuckling when I proudly

announced "there's nothing obvious" after my two hour diagnosis and in retrospect, so am I now.

After tidying up, I realised that I didn't have any time now to dedicate to the list so played with the new video recorder again. I did however manage to read a bit of advice from the Caravan Club's website which made me laugh; "On your first trip out, you will probably not want to travel too far from the Port". Hah! Not me. Full on 1,300 miles. Easy.

I received more good luck wishes today and also some good advice. I've banked some of it to use against the increasingly doubting Mrs.F in relation to weight. There is apparently, after all, a weighbridge nearby that will prove my sanity and hopefully enable us to only ferry the things we really need.

I still haven't fixed the final route, nor even settled on variables loosely related to where I might end up. I don't think it's as important now as it was so I have spent a bit of time trying to get getting video to work on here for the actual trip. If I eventually get the clip to load, you might be a bit disappointed with its quality and its boring nature, but I had to record something and that's what I ended up with. It might be a bit unreliable so don't be disappointed if it doesn't work.

Tomorrow, I really will get on with that list and I expect that will highlight a few more areas I am way behind on.

#### 1 comments:

##### Anonymous said...

National lampoon's Christmas spanish vacation.... all you need now is Chevy Chase then your have the makings of the biggest movie of the year !!!!

#### **Links and Video clip** - 8<sup>th</sup> December 2006

I haven't been able to get links to open in new pop ups so if you click a link, you will have to click 'back' to close that link.

The video clip runs using Flash which means you might need this software installed to view it. If the video doesn't play after a couple of clicks, please try using this link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAc91wGgJzQ>

## **Problems with the Van?** - 9<sup>th</sup> December 2006

If I didn't have enough to worry about, I'm now worried about the reliability of the van.



When I collected it from the dealer (Barrons, Herne Bay) I had to point out a couple of (fairly obvious) faults which were happily sorted immediately. It only had 20 miles or so on the clock so I was anticipating the odd thing here or there. Having looked at the forums, it seems as though I was blessed by the quality of the pre-delivery check (despite the obvious flaws), but, nevertheless, I was still anticipating a couple of hic-cups. I was glad, therefore when I spotted one early on.

When I say early on, I mean on the first trip out, of course. We (all six of us) went to Bury St. Edmonds (about 90 miles) and when we left to come home, it was getting dark. Imagine my surprise and terror when I turned the indicator on to find that every single light went out! Total darkness. The road in front turned blacker than a black thing on national black thing day and we instantly became more invisible than David McCallum. Eddy the Eagle without his glasses could have seen more than I could at that point and Stevie Wonder could have seen more than him. In fact, to any other motor, we existed less than our still non-existent list of things still to do. Fortunately, when I turned off the indicator, the lights came back on and we could see and be seen again. However, this process of jumping beneath Harry Potter's invisibility cloak repeated itself the whole journey.

The next day I called Barrons and a few days later they took the van away. They had a couple of other things to do as well like adjusting the habitation door which was very hard to open/close which they managed no problem. The problem with the lights on the other hand was more difficult, in fact impossible to fix because, according to them, there wasn't anything wrong with them. Er, hello. Calling me a liar? I had no choice but to accept the return of the van and since then, I have been trying very hard to work out whether there still is a problem. I haven't, of course, but that doesn't make me feel any better because I haven't been out in the dark and trying to see if the lights are working properly during the day is, well, a challenge to say the least.



My friend who fitted the camera told me that the problem was probably created when the radio was re-wired to be powered by the leisure battery instead of the cab battery. I didn't know the radio was powered by the leisure battery, and, if I'm honest, I don't really care much either, but it does seem kind of plausible. In any event, I hope they have fixed it but have just chosen not to tell me there was ever anything wrong because

at least that way, I know it's fixed. The last thing I need is for that problem to still be there when I get to France.

I took the van out again today on a 200 mile trip. I was aiming to familiarise myself with the handling a bit more and also get the van weighed. I thought I might also benefit from some more general experience. I was right. Within 50 yards and one bend, doors swung open, things slid about and the waste bin that had been near the sink flew about a bit and crashed into hundreds of bits on the floor. Mrs.F loved that bin. I tied everything down, closed every door properly and moved on. I then stopped and checked the aerial and steps, but that was just paranoia stepping in.

I drove to a friend's house that I hadn't been to before and the Tom Tom took us right there. Brilliant. It brought us back home again but, oddly, using a different route. A bit like Mrs.F in a way. The only concern that I have with the TomTom now in relation to my trip is that it makes no regard for the size of the vehicle it sits in. For example, there were a couple of country lanes today where tree branches whipped the side of the van and a hump-back bridge moment which could have been nasty. I hope it doesn't take me down any dodgy roads in France.



The other worrying factor of Tom Tom's is that it is only as good as the person setting the route into it. I completely forgot to programme the weighbridge's address into it which meant I didn't get the van weighed after all. Der. That's a problem, because the next time available for me to get it weighed is next Saturday which is likely to interrupt the packing performance. Ho hum.

During my trip today and again when I got home, I smelled burning oil. Not chip fat type burning oil but knackered piston rings type burning oil. Not the sort of smell you expect to associate with a brand

new motor and one I hope has been caused by a drip of oil somewhere like the exhaust. I'll have a look tomorrow and hopefully be more useful than I was when I had a look at the washing machine. If not, my trip could be even more challenging than it already is which reminds me, I must add 'Do I have continental breakdown cover?' to my list of things to do. That can join 'Get a Camping Card International (why do they call it a Camping Card International and not an International Camping Card?) and EHIC thingys. And another hundred or so similarly important things I still have to get around to.

Finally, they say we should try to do something new every day. It's not always that easy, but I managed it today. In fact I nearly managed it twice. The first time was going up the A12. I saw on the other side of the carriageway another 'caravan car'. As we passed, the driver waved to me and I waved back. I hadn't done that before and I suddenly felt as though I had been granted honorary membership to an exclusive fraternity. A smile broke about my face not too dissimilar from when I had a mini; a mix of jolly belonging yet slight embarrassment. The second time was when I was coming back down the A12 when the same thing happened yet this time, I was first to wave but the other driver didn't. That was total embarrassment and now I don't know what the 'rules' are.

I expect I'll find out for sure by the time I get to Calais, assuming the van is fit for the trip.

### **Getting to that list, finally...** - 10<sup>th</sup> December 2006

At last I have a list to work to. It covers two pages and has over 40 'things' on it.

After our 'so what's left' sesh, I was so put off by the number of things still left to organise that I actually starting adding things to it that I had already done, just to show myself how much progress I've already made and, pitifully, to make myself feel better. The list has been helpful actually because it has brought a certainty to what I have to get done by next weekend. There's no room left for 'getting round to it', there's only what's first, what's next now.

Since making the list I have made real progress and every time I get something done, my confidence increases. For example, there was a





real 'high five' moment just before lunch when I finally got the water heater working on gas. Might not sound like much to the veterans, but, to me, it was the final tick in a very large box to satisfy myself that I really do know how to operate all of the appliances. Until that point, I was pretty much relying on the weather to be unseasonably kind.

I had a bit of a restless night last night worrying about the van and whether it really does have a problem. That combined with a 15 year old's 'sleepover' ensured that I was kept awake most of the night and by the time Jack Frost laid his white dust this morning, I was totally obsessed . I had a look under the bonnet first thing and checked the oil. That was reassuringly fine, as was the absence of any noticeable leaks. To my eye, the engine bay and underneath looked exactly ordinary and oil/incident free. I went for another drive and instantly smelled the burning oil smell again however. I got out and smelled the exhaust fumes but could not trace anything untoward.

I got back in and sniffed at the heater like a suicidal maniac desperate for carbon and noticed minute traces of burning oil. Mrs. F, as usual, thought I was mental and paranoid and suggested that that is the smell associated with diesel engines on cold days. She may well be right because having never owned a diesel vehicle before, I've no idea what to expect. I shall just have to keep my eye on the engine oil throughout the trip and keep everything else crossed at the same time.



I started the chore of working on the list and found that I was soon ticking and getting rid of boxes quicker than an impatient 'Deal or No-Deal' contestant. I was actually enjoying myself and only took a break to go for a joy ride in my friend's new Rolls Royce Phantom (like the one Alan Sugar owns). What a car. I quickly worked out however that I could have bought my van six and a half times with the money he spent on that car. I wonder if he will have six and a half times as much fun it than we'll have in our van?

Using the list as my master, I ordered the EHIC documents, I organised the first aid kit, I sorted the tool kit, Mrs.F packed some of the food, I wired up a Euro adapter with reverse polarity and I tried very hard to order a Camping Card International. I went to the Caravan Club website and, after seeing nothing obvious, I entered a

search for 'how to buy a Camping Card International'. The results did nothing more than reveal links to documents containing reference to the CCI; nothing told me how to get one. I persevered and clicked every page relating to 'overseas' until finally I found a statement which said 'Where can I buy a Camping Card International (CCI)? - Please contact the travel information officer to obtain this for £4.50. Please note that if you take out Red Pennant travel insurance a CCI will be included in the package.' Gee, thanks. This didn't tell me who the travel information officer is/was or, crucially, where to contact him/her though, did it?

I really am not a fan of the CC website. All of my experiences have ended in frustration and been a complete waste of time. I feel as though further visits will be like watching a remake of Titanic and expecting something other than a sinking. I even tried (foolishly) to check whether I had received a good deal on my Ferry booking. I am going out Dover - Calais and back Bilbao - Portsmouth. The site doesn't support different outs to ins so I'll never find out. Even when I spoke to P&O and asked for a CC discount, they told me to book through the Caravan Club itself which I now know I can't do.



I'll ring them tomorrow to get my CCI and at the same time I'll ask if I can book a Ferry over the phone. Even if I can, it's not much use for full time workers like me who only find the time at the weekend when they are closed. If I'm feeling particularly grumpy, I might point out how rubbish I think their website is and how it is all very well offering me a teapot or tie on their site, but what I'd prefer is something I actually need. I might even point out how surprised I am that they don't even have a chat room for their members.

I'm still a little bit worried about the amount of work still to do, getting it weighed and sorting breakdown insurance are a couple that spring to mind, but, overall, I think we're gonna be ok cometh the day. Mrs. F even had a drive today; the lights were on all the time and despite a frantic use of indicators, the lights stayed on throughout.

If only Christmas wasn't going to get in the way...

## **Christmas Comes but Twice a Year** - 12<sup>th</sup> December 2006

We are leaving home at the crack of sparrows on the 18th December, one week (obviously) before Christmas. The idea is to share Christmas Day itself with my parents in Rojales, southern Spain.



As we shall be taking all of our children with us, to have a 'normal' Christmas (if there is such a thing) means having to also take all of their presents with us too. After all, Santa might not know where my parents live.

One of the side effects of being forced to be mean on the weight allowance is, however, that we cannot possibly hide all of the children's Christmas presents in the Van. If we wrapped and took them all, there wouldn't be enough space or weight left to take all the other things we need, and, boy does Mrs.F 'need' a lot of stuff! I've decided, therefore, that the only way of meeting all the requirements is to have Christmas early and hide a few 'extra' presents somewhere in the van so the kids have still got something to open on Christmas Day itself.



This means having to plan for two Christmases (I presume Christmases is the plural of Christmas?). This coming Sunday, therefore, the 17th Dec, on the eve of our trip, we shall be having our 'first' Christmas and then we shall be having a second one 8 days later. To achieve this, we shall have to get all our cards out early, buy and wrap all the presents early (we always normally leave it to Christmas Eve, like everyone else), and somehow get some of the (lightweight) presents into the van without anyone finding them during our week long trip. It also means two Christmas dinners and, inevitably, having to get Mrs. F two Christmas presents. And, somehow, we will have to explain to our 4 year old how Father Christmas visited us twice.

If Mrs. F is to be the recipient of gifts on each of our Christmas Days, I fear she may well have to settle for 'Andy' presents. For those who aren't familiar with the concept of Andy presents, let me explain. Andy is a guy who only buys presents for his/her partner that he/she actually wants him/her self. For example, last year Mrs. F bought me a Westlife CD. That was an Andy present. So was the Robbie William's

DVD I got for my Birthday and so was the box of chocolates I got at Easter. This phenomenon is named after a guy I knew who really did only buy his wife stuff he actually wanted for himself. His achievements range from mobile phones to TV's to a PlayStation and computer games, all thinly veiled as genuine presents for his suffering and gem sparse wife.

Admittedly, some of our children's toys over the years have flanked the borders of Andy Land, but this year, I don't think I have a choice; Mrs. F will, therefore, be getting a nice new torch, a roadside toolkit and, if she's been really, really good, a guide to all the 'Aires de Services' throughout France. I imagine my stocking(s) will bulge with a similar cache of camping related tidbits. Some batteries and a First Aid kit would be nice.

When it comes to our [real] Christmas Lunch, we are relying entirely on my Parents. The fact they haven't cooked for us for well over 10 years is a bit of a worry, but I'm sure Mrs. F won't be able to hold herself back if she thinks help is needed. For my part, I've managed to source a whopping 2lb Christmas Pud from Fortnum and Mason. Fortunately, it was an unwanted gift to a colleague of mine which means I didn't have to pay for it, which is just as well because I ran out of money ages ago. I shall happily sacrifice the weight on the way out there because I won't be bringing it back with me meaning I will be creating an opportunity to re-use the weight allowance on something else, like beer. Or wine! Thinking about it, maybe I should keep quiet about the Christmas pudding and wrap it up for Mrs. F as another Andy present?



My recent flurry of activity has left me staring at the letter box every morning like an obsessed Rottweiler. I ordered so many things from the Internet that I am now reliant on the Postie to get them to me by the weekend. I'm not sure there's much I can do if they don't arrive in time. I will just have to leave without them I suppose and give myself a good telling off if I end up needing them whilst we are away...

## Privacy? Too Bored to Notice... - 14<sup>th</sup> December 2006



Mrs. F raised the issue of privacy yesterday. She is concerned that with six of us living in such a small space for quite a long time, we might not find the private space we all need from time to time. Not just the parents' child free space but also the kids' parent free space. I guess what she means is that any one of us might get on each other's nerves at any point and won't have anywhere to hide from each other or from any boredom.

At home, everyone has their own room and can come and go (or be sent) as moods dictate. However, in the van, we will have a choice of two small areas whilst on the move. And even when we stop, I'm not sure how comfortable we will find leaving the kids alone with the van or for us to let the kids wander off from the van alone. I think she has a valid concern but I don't think there's anything I can do to address it.

Initially, I gave no thought to privacy and discarded any concept of boredom for the kids during the trip. However, I soon learned from the Haynes Manual of Motor Homes that power will not be available to the habitation part of the van (something to do with electromagnetic fields which could interfere with the vehicle's electronics such as ABS, like during take-off on a plane). This means the kids will not be able to watch videos or DVD's or the telly as we go along.

It's not a problem for us oldens because we will have the scenery to enjoy and traffic to keep us busy (or we can watch a DVD on the reversing camera if we're really that desperate). But, for the kids, there are only so many games of 'I spy' anyone can tolerate and even though we have invented a new game of 'Caravan Car Spotting' (in which the first one who sees and calls out "'Caravan Car" gets a point), I think they will need some extra stimulating entertainment.

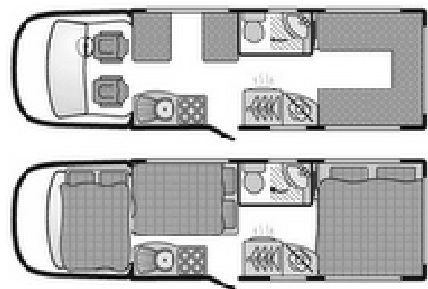
I have, therefore, 'borrowed' a lap top from work and, in addition to Auto Route 2007, installed several movies and games on to it which should keep them entertained a bit. Although the battery on the Lappy is very good, it won't last long enough between charges so I have ordered a flexible 12v fag



lighter extension lead and a power adaptor which cost less than 20 quid in all. That should help the boredom although I doubt it will remove the 'I can't see' or 'he's sitting too close' or 'tell him to stop looking at me like that' type of spats kids insist on having in a vehicle. Apart from providing entertainment of the digital kind, I have invested in a few board games and card games too. I'm looking forward to seeing how they cope with the entertainment we had to put up with when we were forced to sit in the old man's 1100 Austin for hours on end en route to the seaside etc.

Although I have tried to address the boredom factor, I don't know how to address the privacy factor. Getting up (or in our case, down) for a wee in the night might prove a tad embarrassing for the girls as may wandering around in undergarments for the boys. I think we'll just have to see how we get on and see what happens. But it is a worry. The van will be very cramped at night and unlike our attempted dress rehearsals, we can't just boot one of us out if we can't hack it.

We have given a lot of thought to who is going to sleep where and have organised the sleeping arrangements thus; Mum and Dad are upstairs. Girls are at the back on the side seats, one on either side. Our 4 year old is on the floor between the girls using the 'furniture blocks' to make a mattress, but on the floor, not on the slide out base. Finally, the 16 year old is on the converted kitchen area bed.



The consequence of this arrangement not only allows for all of the children to have a separate bed, but as we won't need the slidey out bit for the kitchen bed, I have removed the poles and wooden ends and will leave them behind. That means less weight which means more space for other stuff. The poles are surprisingly heavy and without the wooden end bits, the kitchen area feels much bigger as a result.

There's now only 2 more full days until our first Christmas Day and only 3 days until we leave the UK for two weeks of travelling gypsy posh style. I have got the number of things on my list down to less than 35 and most of the junk I bought during my Ebay spasm has arrived. Some of it might be useful too. If I keep my concentration up and get round to finishing the route, I might even end up clustering some confidence to take with me.



### What if?... – 15<sup>th</sup> December 2006

After the oil burning smell and the lights going out on me, I thought I might need breakdown insurance just in case something goes wrong whilst I'm away. I rang the dealer to ask if the van came with a warranty to include breakdown cover and was told definitely not. So, I got on to the Caravan Club and asked for a quote.

It took half an hour and whilst the lady was very polite, all of the measurements I gave for the van during the application process were just outside either the maximum allowed or would 'take me into the higher cost bracket'.



Misrepresenting a risk is a bad thing in insurance coverage terms so I was surprised to hear the lady happily lie to the system, especially as she probably thought she was doing me a favour. Despite pretending that my van was a better risk than it really is, the quote I got back was horrific. It was going to cost me a whopping £152 to cover me for breakdown whilst in Europe for just the two weeks I was away. Another seven quid would have also seen me covered for the rest of the year, although given the false statements in the proposal, I would probably have not been covered at all anyway. This quote, remarkably, doesn't cover me whilst in the UK except whilst on route to the port for an overseas journey. I thanked the lady for her time and hung up in yet another state of dissatisfaction with the Caravan Club.

I fired up t'internet, filled out just a couple of forms, told the whole and complete truth and within minutes had much better deals from everyone I asked a quote for. I mentioned this on here and was contacted by some readers who told me that my van should have had a 3 year warranty including European breakdown cover. I checked the paperwork and they were right. I have AA cover for the first three years of the van's life. I can forgive the dealer for making a mistake. However, I'm really impressed with this warranty and therefore very surprised that the dealer didn't make more of a point about it (or any mention in fact) as a selling point.

My normal insurance documents have now come through just in time for the trip, so I now feel fully covered, if not fully prepared...

## **Review of the Van, So Far...** - 15<sup>th</sup> December 2006

Ok, I know it's early doors, but I thought it might be worth documenting my first impressions of the Bessacarr E495 that I have bought and will be using for this trip. It will be interesting to revisit this naive review when I get back to see if first impressions last and also to see if anything else worthy of note comes up along the way.

I've never done this before, so please bear with me if I waffle;



### **Styling**

I think the Bessacarr E495 is ugly from the outside. Sorry, but it is. In fact, I think pretty much all of the converted van based models are. Well, they just they look awkward. They are for motoring what Cherie Blair is to modeling. For me, compared to the new 2007 models, my van looks dated and clumsy, especially when you stare at the massive overhang at the back. My initial view was that the overhang would probably prevent me dangling bikes off the back and remove any chance of plopping a scooter or smart car back there. I would have thought that adding anything other than a few stickers would result in a loss of traction and possibly wheelies at the front. The inside is a different story however. On paper, the layout really suits us and our needs and the style/colours of the furniture are very conservative (you might say 'nice') unlike some of the garish colour schemes we have seen in other vans.

I'd be fibbing if I said we had an extensive library of knowledge on which to base our opinions, but from what we have seen and heard, we are happy with our van and what it offers us for the price. I'm sure our trip will change at least some of that.

### **Pre-delivery and Handover**

There were a couple of issues with the van that I thought shouldn't have been there when I collected it. One of the seat sides (the plastic bit) was damaged and the ladder had a rubber end missing. The shop fixed them straight away though. Despite explaining my virgin status, there wasn't a lot of effort put into showing me how everything worked so I was left to suss that myself. It wasn't until later that I realised I couldn't lock or unlock the habitation door or that the driving lights

kept going out. The dealer did resolve those quickly however and even topped up my diesel to cover the mileage.

## Price



We negotiated around £3,000 off the screen price and also got lots of extras included either free or at cost. You could say that we are just good at negotiating, but it was surprising how far we got them to drop and that created a bit of paranoia about whether the van was rubbish and they would sell it for any price to any old mug. Some post purchase due diligence put that theory in the bin thankfully. We were just lucky to have chosen the very end of the season to jump into this unknown pool and just happened to stumble on an overstocked supplier willing to accept a good deal.

## The Driving Experience

Before the one mile test drive, my only other van experience was when I hired a Luton Transit for one day several years ago. The test drive was terrifying but driving away after I had paid for it was just ghastly. Mrs. F was in our car following behind me. She was absolutely no help when I approached the first junction and somehow pointed this mobile vessel the wrong way down the slip road of a very fast and very busy dual carriageway. That was the first three point turn and not the easiest of circumstances, especially as I hadn't had the reversing camera fitted by then. I think I did the turn in 7 points and only held up about 100 people. I was impressed with the high cab position at this point because it afforded me the opportunity to lip read some of the delayed drivers' comments on the situation. I'm still not sure what they meant by Cupid Anchor though.

As I have documented on here already, I have so far embarked on just two trips out (400 miles) since bringing the white whale home; the first ending in terror when the lights went out and the second ending in joy when the lights didn't go out. These trips have helped me form two very important observations about my new vehicle. First, I absolutely cannot get the seat in the right place and second, the drive itself (notwithstanding said inadequate positioning) is very pleasing and indeed easy. The ride is a bit wobbly (mostly side to side from the wind) but all of the controls are easy to get at and the



gearbox has really loosened up and is easy to use now (although Mrs. F still struggles to find 5th). The steering is light but a bit random mixing under with over steer for no apparent reason. The foot pedals are almost in the right place but around town I find myself sort of holding my right foot off the ground a bit which makes my leg ache after a while.

I think the engine is plenty powerful enough, especially when you have reached more than 30 miles an hour. Ok, it might be a bit slow off the mark, but I think the power delivery is just about right and sufficient for a heavy load. I even got it up to 85 on the clock once with no material loss in handling. The engine is a bit noisy though but with no experience in the diesel department, I can't really form an objective opinion.

On the down side, the brakes are a bit crap. Sure, the thing stops ok, but there have been times when its felt like the pedal was touching the carpet; if I had been able to get both feet on the pedal, I would have probably felt more confident in the process. Perhaps I'll just have to drive slower?

Fuel economy is crap as well, but then what else should I expect? I've no idea how bad it is, but to be fair to it, it's less aerodynamic than a box of Shredded Wheat, weighs several tonnes, has got an enormous engine and is being driven badly by an inexperienced man in a hurry.

The worst part of the driving though is definitely the driving position. I just can't get the seat in the right place. I'm only 5 foot 9 and three quarters tall, but I still can't quite squeeze meself in. There is a 'wall' behind the driver's seat which is too close for me and Mrs. F. It doesn't matter if the seat is up or down or halfway up or halfway down, the seat is too close. Worse than that though is that the ignition key is set in a huge block of plastic that digs into your right knee. Whilst that is creating a dent in your cartilage, the other keys on the fob are dangling and tickling you. It's really, really annoying and a really, really bad design.

## **Extras**

Like most of my vehicle purchases, I got carried away with the extras but, fortunately, I got most of them thrown in with the deal. By the time I signed the deal, I had spent all of two weeks 'learning about what I did or didn't need to add to the standard spec.



I got a solar panel that cost me £175 fitted. It was the medium sized one and so far, I couldn't tell you what difference it has made. For all I know, they could have bunged a display model up there because I have absolutely no idea how I might tell whether this crucial piece of kit is worth the money invested in it. I haven't made that particular confession to Mrs. F yet of course. I have simply pointed out the mass of wires and a black box with lots of wires coming out of it in the cupboard which I assume has something to do with it.

I ordered a TV aerial. I was told it was mandatory which made we wonder why it wasn't already fitted as standard. It apparently cost them 256 quid, but I didn't pay a penny for it so I feel slightly guilty for picking on it. Nevertheless, I didn't have a clue how it worked and it took me ages before I finally got a picture on the TV that I also bought as an extra (I looked at the LCD's but thought the picture was rubbish and they were too expensive. Also, the E495 has a very nice place perfectly designed for an old fashioned CRT TV so I bought a 15 inch one that was half price in the shop). I thought (gawd knows why) that the aerial was designed to always receive a decent signal like a car radio aerial. I saw the red dot but I didn't know why it was on there or what it meant.

After failing to get a picture, I remembered the instruction manual thing and had a quick read. It wasn't that helpful, but it did make it clear that you're supposed to turn it around and raise it up and down. That took me long enough but I also had a miracle moment in which I learned that TV signal are sent on differing polarities. What that means is that pictures are pumped out either horizontally or vertically, but not both. So, sometimes the aerial will need to lean sideways and sometimes flat. The levers inside the cupboard facilitate the relevant movement and the red dot is supposed to help store it away again; I jump on the seat and look out of the sunroof though so I don't know which way is red, so to speak. Anyway, the aerial works and I didn't pay for it so I think it's great.

The reversing camera was fitted by my friend and cost £400. It is a fully wired set up and the cables are almost invisible, in fact only about 18 inches are exposed and that is only 6mm wide. I asked him to fit a wireless system because that is what I had read was the latest thing and I didn't really want cables 'everywhere'. He talked me out of it by

saying that the advantages of wireless installation were outweighed by the performance. Apparently, they suffer terribly from interference and are really poor if you want to use them whilst driving. I don't know if that's true or not, but I do know that the system he installed for me (which cost about the same as a wireless unit) is bang on. It isn't (funnily enough) much cop for reversing with (dunno why yet) but it is very very good for checking blind spots when changing lanes and also for backing up to our garage when parking. I can actually get it within 1mm of the garage. Easy. Other than that, it acts as a screen for watching DVD's and also has games built in, but I haven't tried these features yet. In all, however, I am very happy with it and glad I bought it although it did cost a lot.

The alarm is a Toad something or other. It cost me £300 fitted and gave me the additional benefit of central locking. It can also be configured to make the steps come down or windows open etc at a touch of the remote fob button. I decided to leave those options until I get back. The alarm also has an immobiliser built into it which definitely works (much to my annoyance actually) and which operates automatically. I have had some scares with the alarm and still don't know how to set it properly, but as it was a requirement of the insurance and as it really does work and I've also got central locking now, I'm glad I got it. It was expensive though and its presence hasn't stopped me buying a fog horn to use during the night to gather attention. I'm cynical by experience and believe people always ignore car alarms believing they are nothing more than a nuisance created by an inept operator and not a real attack etc.



The awning was another freebie which was supposed to have cost me £560. Yeah, right. I opened it (eventually) but I haven't used it for its real purpose yet although I've no doubt it will perform well. I don't understand why it doesn't come with its own tie down kit though, another extra added to the Fego shopping basket.

The storage cover was an extravagant expense at £220. So far, apart from winding us up when trying to put it on, it has done nothing to my eye other than scratch all of the plastic windows. It doesn't keep the van dry underneath and it is so bulky when you have removed it that I'm already regretting buying it. Maybe that wasn't a good idea after all.



Finally, I got two smallish gas bottles thrown in too. Can't think of anything to say about them other than they are red and still almost full of gas. I don't understand why the thread for the adaptor needs to be reversed though.

## **Comfort**

The cab doesn't have air conditioning. It does have a good heater though which has come in handy on both of my trips so far. I could have had A/C added for an extra £1,200 but a quick survey of opinion has shown a mixed view on the subject. I couldn't afford it anyway, so that is one option to possibly come back to. The seating arrangement is great. Four seat belts around a table near the cab is really good. The seats at the rear, however, are a little bit too low on the back which means we will probably spend a lot of time laying down in the back.

The fixtures are very comprehensive and now I know how they all work, I'm really impressed. I'm guessing all Motor Homes are fitted out like this however. I haven't cooked anything yet and I haven't tried the shower either. The water pump is very efficient I think (again, I don't know where the plimsoll line sits) but I think the sink drains unnecessarily slow though.

There appears to be lots of storage space but I'm still paranoid about the weight so I don't know if we will be able to fill it all up. I'm having it weighed tomorrow (we've been packing stuff into it for ages now) so I might have a better idea then.

## **Insurance and Warranty**

The insurance cost £330 and limits us to 5,000 miles a year. There is no cover for breakdown recovery which I can buy from the caravan club for a whopping £152 for my 2 week trip or for £159 for the year. That only covers breakdowns abroad (or on the way to the port) however. I can buy breakdown cover from Churchill for both the UK and Abroad for a lot less than that. Another gripe with the Caravan Club which means I am still wondering why I bothered joining. The warranty is three years 'end to end' or 'back to front' depending on who you talk to or for the mechanical vehicle parts and the habitation part if you speak in English. I think that is very good but it does mean having to pay for both types of annual service.

## Summary

Overall, we are satisfied with what we have bought, how much it cost, the extras we added to it and how we think it will suit us. We aren't particularly attracted by its external appearance but very satisfied with its interior comforts. Time will tell if we still feel that way after a bit of time in 'wild use'.

### That's a Weight off my Shoulders... - 16<sup>th</sup> December 2006

We got the Van weighed this morning. What a palaver that was.



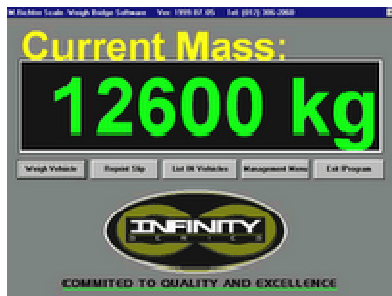
The place we went to was only 10 miles or so away but we still managed to get lost. Not a confidence boost for a man about to drive 1,300 miles in two foreign Countries. The Sat Nav ended up taking us down some treacherous country lanes which nearly resulted in a crash. The van took a bit of a beating from overhanging branches instead and now a couple of the nearside windows have some scratches on them. I read somewhere how to get the scratches out, but I haven't got time for that now.

We eventually found the place; it was almost impossible to miss actually (too much reliance on TomTom there methinks). It was the most minging site you could imagine and the guy 'operating' the weighbridge was as thick as thick cheese. It was obvious I didn't have a clue what to do yet he didn't bother trying to help. In the end, covered in mud, I wandered around the place staring into offices until, at last, I was spoken to. It got a lot easier from there although I still had to wallow in the mud a bit more before I finally got the news I had been dreading.

It cost me ten quid and all I got for the privilege was a printed sheet of headed invoice paper with lots of numbers and references on it. I had to ask him three times before he finally realised that, yes, I was actually interested in knowing the result and the overall weight of everything inside the white monster that looked so out of place amongst the Skip lorries. 3640 he announced. I pretended I knew what that meant, muttered 'kilo's I presume' under my breath and wandered back through the mud to join my family and all our stuff



that we had hurriedly stuffed in just half an hour before. As we drove home ignoring the TomTom, we tried to work out from the log book if that was good news or not. My instinct said it was bad news but then I've been paranoid since the first time I filled it up with diesel. It is, after all, heavy fuel.



The Log book said 'revenue weight 3850 KG gross' which means less to me than the X Factor does to Napoleon. I think I can be forgiven for being confused because whilst attempting to master this particular chapter in my thesis on Motor Caravanning I have been confronted with terms including Actual Laden Weight, Gross Train Weight, Maximum Axle Weight, Maximum Technically Permissible Laden Mass, Maximum User Payload and Mass in Running Order. Why does it have to be so confusing? Anyway, I didn't find out for sure where I stood until I got home and checked the Bessacarr manual (see what I did there?) to find it telling me I am allowed '3850kg MTPLM' and a Gross Train Weight of 5500kg. I'm guessing the 'train' bit refers to the allowance when towing so I think it means my van can be a total, overall, aggregate weight of no more than 3,850 kilos.

Hoorah. That means I am currently underweight and don't have to be such a meany and summarily evict unnecessary teddies etc. It also means we can take more Christmas presents with us to open on our second Christmas Day assuming we can keep them out of the childrens' sight until then. What I didn't do, however, and if I'm honest I don't think was possible anyway, was have the rear axle weighed. I'm not too worried about that though because I am quite a way under to feel ok about it. I have deliberately stored all heavy items between the two axles.

We are having our first Christmas Day tomorrow and will then finish off our final bits of packing. My list has shrunk to an acceptable level now and only has a few normal last minute panic to do's on it like 'find driving licence' and 'enter route into TomTom/Route Planner'. I went out and bought a few more 'essentials' today including a canister shaped inverter with extension leads which should give us 240v power in the kitchen area whilst driving along. I might even find the time tomorrow to try it out.

## **Merry Christmas (part 1)** - 17<sup>th</sup> December 2006

For the umpteenth time in my reasonably short life, I was pleased to see that the ratio between wrapping and unwrapping Christmas presents remains stable at about 30 to 1. Within a flash, our first Christmas sprang into life this morning. The stack of presents was unwrapped in exactly one thirtieth of the time it took us to wrap them up and the normal debris of the festive season was soon all over the place. I received the anticipated 'Andy' presents; tyre paint, emergency puncture repair etc but I also became the proud owner of some plastic fish. Hmmm. Apparently, that's what I asked for. (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vF6fplG2yCs>) Hmmm.

Anyway, preparations for our trip are well advanced and well in hand now with just a few final bits and pieces to load. The route has been loaded onto the Lappy as have several films. We are sticking resolutely to our travel plan for the first day (staying at a booked site near Auxerre) and will work out from there where we will stay next. I don't think we will be too adventurous so will not try to avoid the toll roads. The extra expense will probably be worth the peace of mind.

We are now turning our minds to getting the house ready for being empty for the next two weeks. Max (the dog) has gone to the kennels and Mr. Wilks (the cat) will be looked after by our neighbours in return for the loan of a set of cutlery, ten plates and the use of Mrs. F's immaculately pre-cleaned fridge and cooker. I wouldn't be surprised if this is Mr. Wilks' last Christmas actually. Mr. Wilks is named after a 'Fat Cat' director I used to work with. He's very old and very fat and has started doing odd things old fat cats normally do in their twilight moments. The central heating is still on the blink but we'll have to get that sorted when we get back. I'm not sure I want to leave the Christmas lights to come on outside whilst we are away. They resemble the Griswolds and are powered by a series of plugs, extension leads and timer switches. All very dodgy really.

Mrs. F realised for the first time this morning that as we came in below the weight limit of the van that she has the capacity to add more luxuries. Suddenly, the inventory has increased to the extent expected of a travelling superstar. I have had to remind her that the weight limit is a maximum, not a target.

As we are off at 5.30 in the morning, this will be our last update until we get to France. I've checked the travel situation at the Port and it seems the problems of the last few weeks have been resolved. The

French strikers either got what they wanted or got bored of striking. Either way, I don't care. The ferry is due to run on time so that is one less worry. The weather looks like it will be kind to us too. The 5 day forecast on our route shows light winds and mild temperatures. There is a small chance of a shower as we approach Spain, but I'll settle for that.

Fingers crossed that when I submit my next update that I will be in a similarly jolly mood.

### **Day One Medway to Eaux Pisseaux (341 miles)** - 18<sup>th</sup> December 2006

In a remarkable flurry of achievement, we all managed to board the van and leave home just 15 minutes later than planned this morning, unlike the pasta pan and our collection of soft drinks which didn't leave home at all. Hopefully, they are the only things we left behind.

At the Port, we struggled just a tad to find the right lane to get into for check-in. The Luton at the front hid the signs a bit. Queuing up for the Ferry at Dover without the engine running forced us to crank up the gas heating. It was freezing. The crossing itself was without incident and luckily, we were one of the first off at Calais. From what we could tell, there wasn't another Caravan Car on the boat and, in fact, it wasn't until this afternoon until we saw another one.

Sat Nav led us straight onto the coldest, foggiest and probably most expensive motorway in the whole of France. It was probably also the quietest which was worth the money (31 Euros). I was grateful that my first right hand lane experience was on a relatively quiet, flat road and before very long it was familiar and comfortable to me. I even mastered the art of overtaking lorries at speed in which the 'wash' from the lorry in front first of all pushes your front end to the left and then it sucks you back in making for a kind of slew effect.

Our first destination was Reims. We got there ok but then got lost in the city even though we have been there before and even though we had two electronic navigation guides (TomTom 510 and AutoRoute 2007) to help us. It turns out that these two compete with each other leaving the driver and the co pilot confused and arguing. This happened several times today which means buying a real feel paper map is a must tomorrow. The map is especially needy because I have no concept of where I need to go through to get to where I need to go. This means guessing at exits after toll booths for example gambling on

heading in the direction of say Troyes or Metz. Sat Nav isn't clear enough to help there.

When we first stopped for fuel, the pump didn't work for ages. I had a mild panic when I started to wonder what French for Diesel was. Der. When I went in to pay what seems like a 60% of UK prices, the driver before me handed in his passport before the pump was switched on for him. I wonder if that is normal or if I was just in a dodgy place?

After losing patience with each other one time too many, I ran into a tourist shop and asked the way to Piper Heidseck. It was only round the corner and Mrs. F drove us there after moving the van out of the way of the car park entrance I was blocking. She found it ok and wants to do some of the driving tomorrow. We went on the tour of the caves and it was nice to avoid the queues and for the children to see how champagne was made. A couple of samples and small purchases in the shop and we were soon on our way to Epernay. We were now behind schedule so set off to our first scheduled stop at La Ferme de Hautes Freres in Eaux Pisseaux which we hoped to get to before it was dark. We didn't, of course, but we did still get here relatively pain free. From what we can tell in the dark, it looks like a nice place and is very, very rural.

Hooking up the leccy was a joy. I was expecting an assembly of connectors to get any power into the van, but instead, it worked straight up on just one lead. The power says 16 amps too although we managed to trip it out within 10 minutes of cooking. The battery in the smoke alarm was ripped out within 5 minutes of course to avoid the skwarking it made just on a boiling pan of vegetables. Our first dinner was a great success courtesy of Mrs. F's meticulous planning and also the high spec of the van's equipment. The kids ate in the back room and we had the kitchen table to ourselves hidden by the very useful curtain.

After dinner, me and Mrs. F did something we haven't done together for ages and it took about 20 minutes including tidying up afterwards. I haven't done the dishes for years and now I know why.

Act one of the bedroom conversion performance has just begun so it looks like an early night for all of us. Tomorrow, we plan to go to Clermont Ferrand via Chablis. We still don't know where we are staying and for the life of me, I can't work out how to use that bleeding Aires book....



## **Day 2 Eaux Pisseaux to Cyrat (Near Clermont Ferrand) – 330 miles** - 20<sup>th</sup> December 2006

The farm was the perfect place for us to initiate our overseas overnight experience. Quiet and almost empty. The night was very peaceful and everyone had a good night's sleep other than the 16 year old who 'had the worst night's sleep in the world ever and couldn't manage to get up for the breakfast we had ordered. A simple but nice breakfast with very hot coffee which was welcome against the thick frost.

The dunny was easily emptied into the chemical room and the grey water fell out straight into the pit as I drove over it. Unfortunately, there was no water and as I had previously put too many tablets in the tank and made even the tea taste and smell like bleach, I had ordered Mrs.F to empty the water tank so we could start again. Won't do that again. We had to wait until the end of the day until we could even flush the loo. I wasn't surprised that the pitches didn't have water; the place was minus 5 after all. However, I was very surprised that there was nowhere at all on site to top up the tank. I asked the lady who coiffed something that sounded like 'hat on day are Vienna'. I hung around a bit and got rid of the condensation (there was a lot), cleaned the windows and mirrors outside and also cleaned the reversing camera. Eventually I gave up waiting for whatever might have happened and set off, slightly disappointed that the showers weren't available either.

We headed for Chablis and stopped there for a while. Parking was a bit of a trauma but we risked leaving the van poking about a bit and wandered off to buy some cheese and wine. Then we went to Clamecy and whilst on the way to refueling (again) nearly had a massive prang. Our system of 'clear left' let us down which meant I ended up pulling straight out into the path of a very cross French man. How he missed us is anyone's guess, but thankfully he did. The refuel stop here was a bit of a challenge. I tried to pay at the pump but eventually had to rely on Mrs. F trying at a booth with a very bored French attendant. There appears to be a conflict between the French and UK chip and pin systems, but after 5 minutes, it sorted itself out.

After Clamecy we followed the N151 towards Nevers and straight on to Clermont Ferrand. On the way we bought a map and some French Jaffa Cakes and tried very hard to find a place to stay for the night. With the 3 books we have, we thought it would be easy, but, it wasn't. In fact, we are really struggling to understand how these books work. I can (just about) work out where we have been, but I can't work out

where we need to go to next. Mrs. F found an entry in the Aires de Service book which she thought might be near where we need to be. She was right and, what's more, it was open.

We put the village's name in the Tom Tom and when we got there followed the signs to Camping. Fortunately we got here just before it closed and just before it got dark. Again, we had the problem with re-filling the water, but this time, we were able to ferry water from the toilet block using a large bucket and pour it into the tank with the use of a converted juice bottle for a funnel although, at 600metres above sea level the air and therefore my hands caused a bit of a chill. I wish I had invested in that pump now.

The van is, so far, proving to be perfect for us. Having two areas (kitchen/lounge) means everyone can have their own space albeit a little one. This afternoon, for example, we were able to have a movie show on the lappy at the back with all the blackouts closed whilst me and Mrs.F were able to have a chat and complain about the site books on our own up front.

The roads have so far been as empty as we could have hoped. Most of the time, the roads have been very interesting, taking us through small villages and, other times taking us through wide open countryside. I am now ignoring the Autoroute for directions sticking only to the TomTom mostly because of the conflicts they create but also because I only have the main roads of Europe installed on the TomTom which means I am less likely to be taken down an unsuitable road like I was last week in the UK.

The site we are on in Ceyrat is very good and the showers very warm. It's high up in the mountains so the views are spectacular although we don't like the look of that snow...

**Day 3 – Clermont Ferrand to Beziers 245 miles** - 21<sup>st</sup> December 2006

After a first night spent qualifying for an Olympic medal in shivering, night two was spent sweating it out like a druggie denied his weed. To everyone's discomfort, I haven't quite mastered the heater yet and so have made our snore time either too cold or too hot. Hopefully I'll get it just right tonight. On the first night I set the heater to number 9 on 1000 watts. On day two, I set it to number 9 on 2000 watts. Tonight I think I'll try number 6 on 2000 watts and if that doesn't work, I'll delegate the task to Mrs. F and blame her. It doesn't help keep

travelling south because the temperature is changing to become more mild.

Today was spent mostly on the A75, after we managed to find it that is. With six of us in the overheated van, there was a lot of condensation. Not just at the front, but also at the back. Somehow the Tom Tom got very damp and as a result, it wouldn't work at all this morning. Panic ensued. 'Told you so's were ringing in my ears. This meant having to ask the martian voice of the AutoRoute 2007 to navigate which it probably did quite well but we couldn't hear its instructions for laughter. The way it announces its instructions is hilarious and sometimes the instructions are so long winded that you have missed the turning before you've actually been told to take it. It is clear therefore that the Tom Tom is way ahead in the 'do this, do that' category but the AutoRoute is nevertheless very handy for telling you exactly where you are when you need to know. It's also better at planning a route etc.

I have to say that today's journey was one of the most amazing I have made in a road vehicle. The scenery, the wildlife, the roads and the general excitement of the changing views was just fantastic. For the first time, it actually felt like we were on holiday and really started enjoying ourselves. We stopped off at a service area sat on a mountain region more than 1000 meters above sea level. It was so cold that the air was frozen, as were all of the trees and plants. We stopped initially purely for the novelty value with the snow etc but fortunately there was a grey water disposal area which enabled me to empty the tank as I should have done two days before. Whoops. It was obviously very full because it came gushing out and took at least 5 minutes to empty.

What goes up must come down and thank god. We went up and down more times today than a whore's drawers! There must have been 50 high bridges or viaducts, some of which were very scary for someone like me who suffers from 'I must jump off' syndrome. The highlight however was the Millau Bridge. This construction spanning some 2500 kilometres at 800 metres high is just amazing as you approach it. Going over it is less exciting actually because part of its design is to reduce the wind speed by having deflectors on each side. This has the effect of blocking any view. A bit of a shame really, but still massively impressive. We did record the crossing or we did think we had recorded the crossing but, in fact, managed to do the pause/record confusion thing and didn't get a single frame.

After the bridge came the trauma of finding another secure place to

stay tonight. Mrs. F frowned into those books for well over an hour before announcing our destination. I pumped that into the Tom Tom (which had suddenly started working again) and we arrived at about 4 pm. Despite the book's assurances, it was closed. I found someone nearby and in my best Franglaise managed to be redirected to another place. When I say 'managed to', what I mean is that I had no idea where I was going at all. I didn't fess up to this of course but just kept driving and staring at the street signs for inspiration whilst Mrs. F frowned even harder into the Aires book. This is set to become a part of the routine and is, so far, the only aspect our trip to be causing some stress. We don't want to wild camp yet there are few places to stay in that are open this time of year. I am beginning to regret not planning all of our stops as thoroughly as our first.

Fortunately, I spotted a tourist office just off the main road who directed us to a place nearby. We got there at 4.59 just a minute before it closed. Phew. Yet another close shave and a real worry for a time. This place is called Vias near Beziers and it looks like the whole area only really caters for the high season. We are the only one on site which has 16 amp hook up and showers. The whole area looks like a set from Scooby Doo where the baddy men spring out from behind unused roller coasters or run around the empty go-kart tracks.

At the tourist office earlier, I managed to hack their wireless network and connect to the internet. Other than when my 3g phone worked earlier today, that is the first internet access I have had on this trip which is a surprise. The 16 year old is getting withdrawal symptoms so I might just park up outside the tourist office for an hour or so in the morning to let him stoke up a bit.

We used the local Supermarchet to buy ingredients for our dinner and cooked another cracking selection for everyone. One again, having two seating areas really added value to our experience which, overall, has made us feel really impressed with our choice of van.

Tomorrow we are heading to Barcelona where we hope to park up and have a decent wander. We think we already have somewhere to stay and hope its open so we can avoid that sinking panic we have had for the last two evenings...

**Day 4 Beziers to Vilanova Spain (300'ish miles)** - 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2006

Today was all about getting to Spain which involved spending most of the day on the A9. Before we left the overnight stop, we had a

wander around to make sure that our first impressions were fair. It took all of 18 seconds to determine that, in fact, the place was minging. It looked like a summer caravan park kept open for stragglers like us and as we were the only ones on-site, we got a clear sense of being in the way and not wanted.

Once again, there was no water facility nor drain down facility. The hose pipe assembly I had packed wasn't long enough to reach the tap so we had another morning of pouring freezing water over our hands and feet. I REALLY wished I had bought that portable container and depth charge pump now. Before leaving, we had to pay for the 'services' provided. Given the lack of water, drain down and hot showers, plus the entire lack of any form of entertainment like a bar, we were hugely surprised when asked to cough up a whopping 30 Euros. What? How much? Still, you can't put a price on peace of mind.

We trudged along and up and down a series of hills for a couple of hours until we reached the border. The roads were far busier than the last few days and the winds were very high. We stopped off at Catalan and drained down. Whilst there, I remembered being told how good a stop this place was but how unsafe it would be for an overnight stop. I later found out exactly how unsafe it was when I met a couple who had stopped over there the night before and found themselves on the wrong end of a gassing and forced robbery. Everything they had was stolen and they didn't hear a thing. Even their jewellery was removed from them. Fortunately, they were unharmed, but their Christmas is now well and truly cracked. That 30 Euros suddenly felt cheap and thank God I took the advice I received from the website about stopping at these places.

Crossing the border was underwhelming but nevertheless an event to remember because it at least meant we were now in Spain. Shortly after this, we topped over a thousand miles in total on the road since we left home and at that precise moment that is when we also met our first traffic jam. I couldn't help but observe how well behaved the traffic throughout France had been whereas in Spain, it is very much like the 3 Musketeers; all for one and one for all. A bit worrying really given the dimensions and lack of flexibility in the white whale.

I had planned to tour Barcelona, but chose to abandon that idea when we got stuck amongst 10,000 Dartagnions without a sword with which to defend ourselves. The most troubling bit of driving so far for sure. Maybe if I hadn't had four children in the van with me, I might have

persevered. As it was, I continued onto Vilanova towards a campsite I had pre-programmed into the Tom Tom using the long/latitude from their website. I hadn't done this before, so was looking forward to seeing how it performed. With 10 kilometres to go, I saw a huge sign telling us our site was next left and then 1km on the right. When we reached the gates, the Tom Tom suddenly displayed the 'finish line' but with the planned route coming in from a different direction. If we had stuck with the Tom Tom, we would have still made it, but we would have had to travel 10km further. One of the drawbacks of only having the major roads installed I guess.

Both Mrs. F and I are surprised at how well the children are behaving, not because they are naughty per se, but because whilst this van is well equipped and superbly designed, it is nevertheless still a very small place for two adults and four children to occupy 22 hours a day. I thought it would be difficult for all of us to go to bed and get up at the same time, but somehow it has worked remarkably well. In fact, odd as it may sound, it doesn't feel like I have spent much time with the children at all. I seem to have always been up front and they seem always to be down the back. Today they didn't want the bed put away at the back today so spent most of the time laying down and chilling out.

The site at Villanova is massive. It has the biggest swimming pool I have ever seen, a huge supermarket, lovely restaurant and fantastic saunas and spa. And it was cheaper than the last site we were on. For all the wrong reasons though, it still reminds us a bit of Els Belles from the Carry on Abroad film. It even had a hairy bloke playing a harpsichord in the bar which I assume is a bit, er authentic, isn't it?

Having spent 7 hours driving (on and off), the kids were excited at about 9pm when some decent music arrived on their radio. The volume was cranked up a bit but to our embarrassment, within 2 minutes there was knock at the door. "Can you turn it down" was the clear message from the very droll woman standing there in her dressing gown. I could see where she was coming from, it was bloody ten to nine after all.

Anyway, that hasn't stopped us thinking that we want to stay here another night. This van is just so good for us and the place is so full of things to do that we would probably be daft to rush to the olds. Having missed Barcelona, we might as well stop off here and at least have a couple of hours on the beach n'est pas?



We are really enjoying our Christmas trip, but if there is one thing missing so far, it's, well, Christmas. It just doesn't feel Christmasey enough really. We put the relevant CD on today, but it still didn't do it for me. Maybe it's because the sun keeps shining...

### **Zig Zag Video...**

This is us coming down one of the crazy sections of the A75  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rv68EX7usA8>

**Feliz Navidad...** – 25<sup>th</sup> December 2006 (posted by mobile phone)

We made it here safe and well but very tired. We have been here without internet ever since. We shall be back on the road soon to begin our trip home...

**Update on the last few days...** – 28<sup>th</sup> December 2006

### **Day 5 Vilanova to Rojales – 400 miles**

We decided not to stay another day in Vilanova and chose instead to head straight for the olds. This took about 6 hours in all. We arrived to wide smiles just as it was getting dark. Hoorah!

The drive on this stretch was a bit boring really compared to the landscapes seen across France. The road lanes seemed a bit narrower and the drivers definitely more aggressive and reluctant to let us through. There was a lot more traffic and towards the end, I started to show my first signs of driver's fatigue. My back ached a bit and my right leg was a teeny bit sore, but other than that, since finally getting that seat in the right position, driving has been very easy and very comfortable. Everyone else on the other hand was, by the time we got there, well and truly fatigued. In fact, for the first time in the whole 1,379.4 miles, that phrase "Are we there yet?" came out.

Having the spare bedroom to use in the olds' house meant an opportunity for a new sleeping arrangement in the van. So, the 16 year old went upstairs and me and Mrs. F went at the back. The rest of the clan stayed indoors. The back bed is made up from cushions from the seats and 'blocks' of foam stuff as gap fillers. These are oddly thinner than the seat cushions which means that unless you put them on the outsides where ones feet and head go, your bed ends up feeling a bit like a flat lilo in an empty swimming pool. We had a dry swim last night so I shall be putting the blocks in the right place for tonight.

Today and for the next few days, we are just going to be hanging out and relaxing with our folks and do not expect to do much driving. Hopefully, the sun will shine a bit so we can take in some rays and maybe clean the van which really needs it, both inside and out. A couple of things have broken in the van and surprisingly a couple of things have gone missing too, like the camera case; there one minute, gone the next. Having it empty of us all for a while should enable us to give it a thorough service which should mean finding all those bits and bobs.

### **Day 6 – Torrevieja (20 miles)**

We went out for a gad around Torrevieja and into a huge Carrefour. It was a total nightmare to park the white whale in the car park. We ended up taking up two spaces. The van immediately attracted some attention from some 'hoodies' who kept staring at us waiting for us to wander off before having a go at breaking in. I doubled back out of their sight, went straight up to them and took their picture. I then pointed to the van and said 'No' lots of times. This made them run off and after that I felt a lot safer about the van and ultimately, it was left alone.

I tried out the shower in the van today, but gave up quickly after banging my elbow more times than a champion arm wrestler. Not only is the space very small, but the water pressure is so slow that the water comes out at just like it does when you're in the swimming pool and you squirt it out of your mouth. It might be something to do with the low voltage here, but as I haven't tried it anywhere else, I don't know if that is normal or if there is something I can do about it. Either way, it doesn't matter much because we can use the olds' shower anyway.

We're all looking forward to our second Christmas tomorrow.

### **Merry Christmas – part 2**

Today we had our second Christmas and much to our four year old's surprise, Santa visited twice this year. We didn't quite manage to have lunch outside, but it was till odd scoffing sprouts with the sun shining so bright outside. On Boxing Day we did actually manage lunch outside in the sun. Very nice.

## **Day 10 Rojales to Madrid (350 miles)**

We started our trip home today and decided to make two over night stops before our ferry leaves Bilbao on Friday lunchtime. Before we waved goodbye to the olds, we gave the van a really good clean on the inside and got everything ready. We also had to reinstall all of those Christmas presents we had spent so long wrapping and hiding. It's amazing that despite all of the planning around what to take/not take and where to put it all, we completely forgot to remember where we stored everything. For example, when it came to finding somewhere to stay on our way to Bilbao, I didn't have a Danny where the guide books were. I 'deliberately' put them somewhere safe because I knew I wouldn't need them until after Christmas. I found it in the end on the shelf above the boiler which I had completely forgotten even existed. Getting things out of the van has been a bit like the morning after moving into your new house when you really don't know where anything is because nothing has found its place yet; it's amazing how much stuff you can lose in such a small space.

I will have to draw up a list of things I should have bought with us and another list of things I shouldn't have bothered with. On the 'should have' list, a dustpan and brush is definitely top of the list. I can't believe I forgot that and I can't believe how many times I've been reminded for forgetting it. I thought I would have been given some credit for bring the modern day equivalent though, a Dyson hand-held vac, but it turns out that that will actually end up on the 'shouldn't have' list. For 99 quid, you don't get a lot for your money. It should be sold in Sports shops as a piece of workout equipment; it's quite hard work to use it. However, its least appealing attribute is its overall performance. There is no mains cable use and the battery (which has to be fully charged to work) only lasts about 6 minutes. During those six frantic minutes, the carpet is basically smeared with the plastic nozzle creating a static rub of magnetism binding clogs of hair and dust that can only be collected up by hand really. Unlike its bigger brother, the vacuum part of this tool doesn't exactly vacuum that well so, overall, it has been a real let down, especially today when it actually stopped working altogether. If that isn't a bad enough write up for you, the sod also takes up a lot of space too.

Anyway, the van was eventually cleaned and rid of unneeded stuff and we were on the road again by 10. It felt odd being in the spacious cab again after a few days being ferried around in my Dad's Golf. I spent ages the day before with the three guide books, a large map and my

Tom Tom working out a basic route and where to stop on the way. This has been by far the most difficult part of this adventure for me. Buying the van, booking the ferries and even learning all the things I've had to learn have had their moments, but they were easy compared to planning where to stop. I think there could be a number of reasons for this;

- I'm rubbish at this and at reading maps and planning stuff generally
- The maps are difficult to read if you don't have a general understanding of what places are where
- The guide books are deliberately designed to be hard to use – some don't even give maps of the areas they are trying to guide you through and
- Most places are closed because it is the lowest point of the low season

My experiences of France made me call ahead to the stops in Spain. Today I was lucky that this only took me about 45 minutes in all and that the first two places I called were open and spoke a bit of English. I also deliberately chose the largest sites because they are more likely to be easier to find or be known by the locals if I get lost. Having the Tom Tom helped work out how long the driving would take so it made the planning a bit easier. My journey up to Bilbao is now split into two 5 hours drives leaving me just outside Bilbao itself the night before the ferry leaves.

We drove up to Madrid today along more peage and some very bumpy roads and steep hills. The route took us straight through the middle of Madrid which was great. However, it played havoc with the Tom Tom because the streets were filled with overhanging Christmas decorations which blocked the satellite signal meaning I had to use my instinct a couple of times and just head north. We arrived at our chosen site and were charged a humongous 51 Euros for parking and showers. No bar, restaurant, internet, nothing. Just a car park and a shower block. Still, as Mrs.F observed, it is very safe and a reasonable premium to pay really...

### **Crossing into Spain..**

An underwhelming moment, but a moment captured nonetheless. Seasonal music too...

View video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9rnrHSS47s>

## **Day 11 Madrid to Bilbao (340 miles)** - 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006

The site we stayed at last night near Madrid worked out to be very good actually and definitely a place to think about for the summer time. During the depths of winter, however, it's not much to shout about really; nothing more than an expensive safe haven and a shower block. As the last few days have been very warm and sunny, it was odd watching the kids throwing snowballs at each other across the frozen swimming pools now that we have moved north and beyond 1000m above sea level.

As we left, we realised that we had managed to use the electric hook up without actually paying for it. Even though we had paid more than 50 euros for just one night, it was an extra 4 Euros for electricity. They had initially escorted us to a pitch without lekky, but after driving around town for a bit, we returned to a more level pitch that happened to have a power supply. It wasn't much cop though because it kept tripping out if we used more than just one heavy wattted item at a time.

The Tom Tom was instructed to take us to the next site north east of Bilbao which it did very well. The owner of the site had told us to arrive before 5pm or face parking in the car park for the night. As became customary during this trip, we arrived with just one minute before closing time and after struggling to found the reception area (it was just a buzzer on a wall) we were given the freedom to berth anywhere we liked. Three pitches drew our attention and one after the other we bowled up only to find that the electricity wasn't working. Another down side to travelling low season. We returned to the main field (10 yards from the car park) and got the hook up working fine.

Fine for a minute anyway.

The electricity kept tripping out so, after a couple of tries, I changed the port I was plugging into and not only did the lekky survive the abuse we gave it, but the buzzing from the meter box also stopped. This, as I will explain, brings me on to that list of things I should have bought with me.

Four weeks ago I wouldn't have had a clue about reverse polarity. I'm not that much of an expert now it has to be said, but I do know what it is. Unfortunately, I don't know when it exists because I didn't bring a reverse polarity tester with me. To make me look even sillier, I nevertheless bought with me a European plug wired for a reversed

polarity supply. How I thought this reversed wired applicator could be used when I was never to know when it needed to be used is beyond me now but that's where I'm at. Der brain.

Anyway, in my defence, I tried very, oh ok, quite hard to buy one, but Barrons were out of stock and the camping shops I subsequently went in didn't have any either so I was forced to travel and take my chances. Up until last night I thought reverse polarity was a bit of a hyped up propaganda in the same category dreamt up by the campsites when warning of the 'gassing and robbery' at the Aires. However, in the same way I have had [second hand] experience of camper vans being gassed and robbed, I now think I have had first hand experience of reverse polarity.

The first clue was with the hoover not working anymore. The second clue was with the extreme buzzing from the fuse box. I think I have managed to pogger the [Sir] Dyson by charging it on a reversed circuit. Also, when I changed the buzzing plug points, the tolerance of the burden on the circuit significantly increased. So, although now it's too late, I have learned that you can tell if your hook up is incorrectly wired if it buzzes loudly. I suppose, however, that I could have learned that too if I had managed to get a reverse polarity tester and bought it with me. If I had managed to get one of those before I left, I might still have a hoover that works which would have been really handy today when Mrs.F accidentally threw an entire packet of Rice Crispies everywhere.

The drive up to Bilbao was dominated by the last 30 miles or so heading north east to where the campsite was. The roads resembled those seen on the Italian Job (the Michael Cain one). Dah dah dah dah dah dah dah dah, de dah dah dah. Jeez, up up, down down. Hairpins, cliffe edges. Everything. To top it all, the final 500 metres up to the site was so steep that the van nearly didn't make it. It was at least a one in 15. Then, of course, we had to do it all over again in the morning on our way to the port, but this time with me being on the cliff side and with the disadvantage of a very strong wind that had whipped up during the night. I remembered the tip about parking facing the breeze, but there was no breeze when we arrived yet by the morning the wind was full on our beam at about force 6. This meant most of us had had weird wind related dreams mostly involving rolling down the edge of a cliff and crashing.

I deliberately chose the site a Lekeitio because it meant we wouldn't have any trouble plodding off into Bilbao to get the ferry the next day



at 12'ish. Yeah right! First of all, we had the 30k of loopy lanes to navigate then the very poor street signs pointing out the ferry port to miss. It seemed to me that there was literally just one sign saying 'ferry this way' and it came too late for me. I had long since committed to follow the truck in front which went straight into some kind of customs area I quickly did an illegal U-turn and proudly lied to my confused family that 'I forgot to fill up on cheap fuel before heading back'. I then got back on the motorway and headed for the next exit where a fuel station saved my blushes. Looking at the video, I can now see that the exit was clearly signed so it must have just been me that missed it, probably distracted by the map on the Tom Tom.

Next time round, I followed the signs and got on the waiting boat no trouble. The weather is a bit desperate so it looks like we are in for a well dodgy crossing. The captain has already extended the crossing time by an hour and that's before we have even left.

Shortly before boarding the ferry, we topped over 2,000 driving miles in the van. Without a doubt the longest drive I have ever been on. Apart from one forced spell, I have done all of those 2,000 miles behind the wheel. I will document my full views later, but it is suffice to say that I am massively impressed with the van and how it has performed. When fully loaded, it is a bit slow off the blocks, but once it's off, it just keeps going and going so that on the whole, we have been cruising between 70 and 85 mph. Very little fatigue and absolutely no quibbles whatsoever. I couldn't have asked for more. It definitely gets a 10 out of 10 for the drivability aspect and the habitation side doesn't come far behind either.

We are now on our way home and on reflection this trip has been more of a road trip than a Christmas adventure. We're all glad to be going home, but we'll all be a bit sad to have effectively lost a Christmas because no matter how you dress it up, unless you are at home, Christmas just isn't Christmas...

Video can be seen at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_uwj7j7Vfw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_uwj7j7Vfw)

**Happy New Year** - 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007

Not enough time to finish the story today, so here's a couple of videos to have a butchers at. I'll post the final chapter in our story before the weekend and follow it up with some pictures, videos, a full review of

the van and a dictionary of terms as seen from a beginner's view.

The first video is how it looked at the top of the mountains on the A75 near Poncy (glad it's not like that outside now) and the second is a minute of the ziggy road near Bilbao that was relentless, it went on and on and on, a bit like the Mother-in-Law...

Click on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy-IKUFCp7I> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwwF6XEILcE> to see them online.

### **Last (Wobbly) Legs Home - Days 12 and 13 (at Sea)** - 2nd January 2007

Despite my best efforts to miss the ferry, we did eventually board it (see video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RweV1DQGCsc>).

In fact, we were the very last on. The ferry itself (the Pride of Bilbao) reminds me a lot of Spain. Not in a flamenco type of way, but in a more physical way. At the risk of sounding offensive, this vessel is, well, a bit untidy. Everything about it is a bit tired and in need of a good clean, much like the majority of the Spanish scenery we saw during the last couple of weeks.



It seems as though the Spanish can't really be bothered to finish anything properly, be it pavements or wiring or just cleaning up. Perhaps it is either too hot or too cold for them to physically be able to but, whatever the reason, that 'Keep Britain Tidy' campaign was a jolly good idea that the Spanish could learn from. As for the Pride of Bilbao, this vessel has been navigating the Bay of Biscay for over 13 years now so it's entitled to look a bit weary I guess.

The programme of entertainment on board was very good but the prices charged to its captive audience are a bit of a rip off. Had I known that in advance, I probably would have stocked up with more drinks and snacks before leaving Bilbao, but as it was, I spent over £150 feeding and watering us all whilst on board. Still, I did manage to win the bingo earning a free mini cruise for me and Mrs. F for next year. On that journey, I hope the weather and therefore the crossing will be kinder to us however. As we boarded and found our cabins, the Captain flooded us with warnings of bad weather ahead.



Shortly after leaving port, we were hit by a force 9 gale which lasted right through the night. This meant that the majority of the passengers fell ill and started blowing chunks. This included Mrs. F and all the children, but surprisingly not me. I was one of the lucky 20 or so who were treated to the 'Hollywood Nights' evening in the gala bar all to ourselves. It was just us few blokes and virtually the entire crew who easily outnumbered all of the passengers on what was a really empty crossing. The swell caused by the Force 9 gale was so rough that within 2 hours of slipping port, the entire vessel stank like the last hour of a boozy Stag night. Disgorged food particles strewn everywhere.

It was a shame the crossing was so bad because we had planned for the trip to be 'our' time where the kids could go and do what they wanted and me and Mrs.F could be left to do whatever we chose. To help meet this purpose, I booked the children a 4 bunk room and we had a Club Class cabin. Upgrading us from standard to Club class cost an extra £20 (I think) but this was definitely worth it. Not only did we have a bigger cabin with a proper double bed, tv, room service, two chairs, a dressing table and two windows, but this grade of ticket became 'cancellable' which meant I could have had a full refund had I needed to cancel the trip (unlike the standard ticket). In addition, we received two vouchers for free Champagne and two vouchers for free breakfasts (£17 value). In all, definitely worth the upgrade, especially as you only have to upgrade one of the cabins to get the cancellation option.

Despite its tardiness, the vessel is very comfortable (or it was when the weather eventually calmed down) and it is very well equipped. It has two cinemas, several bars and restaurants, for example. Certainly enough to keep the children occupied for the entire 35 hours or so we were on board. The shop is well stocked too and they even carried our swag down to the van for us.

When we eventually got off, there were just a couple of hours more driving until we got home. Of all the 2,125 miles, those last 100 home were by far the worst. The weather was so bad that it felt like we were in a giant washing machine being spun around from side to side. It was a bit weird driving on the left again, but even more weird driving in the dark and in the rain. Since leaving home 2 weeks ago, we hadn't seen a drop of rain and only drove briefly when it was dark. It

was ironic, therefore, that the challenging part of this challenge was on the final leg in the UK, but there you go. That's not what I would have put my money on.

On getting home, we were pleased to see that other than Mr. Wilks (the cat) all was well although annoyingly the central heating hadn't fixed itself. Mr. Wilks unfortunately spent Christmas in the vets having suffered a biting attack, probably by a fox, on Christmas Eve. Our neighbour was terrific in sorting Wilky out for us and he is on the mend now. The dog came back from the kennels ok and then we hosted a New Year's Eve party.



On New Year's Day, we all went out in the van again to visit family in Broadstairs (about 100 mile return trip). It was then, for the first time, that I realised how appalling our roads are. The major roads are ok, but compared to our continental cousins' roads, our local roads are riddled with potholes and bumps which makes driving in the van very uncomfortable and quite hard work. Perhaps that explains why I found driving in France and Spain such a doddle?



Once we managed to find a moment to ourselves, we were able to reflect on the amazing trip we had been on and also how we had fared on such a challenging first trip. We were also able to rate the van and our performance and consider how much we had learned. I will document some of those views in the next few days together with a full van review. I'll also upload a few more pictures and video clips and a glossary of some of the terms we have learned. After that, this blog will be complete and left on here for us to review in a year or so to remind us just how green we were to begin with.

In the meantime, it is fair to conclude that the trip was even better than we imagined it would be. We expected the children to get bored and for things to go wrong. However, they didn't and they didn't. Also, the thought of driving 300 plus miles a day sounds tiresome, but actually, it wasn't. It was mostly a pleasure. I think if we had been in a car or on a coach, it would have been much harder and less enjoyable. However, in the van, having two seating areas meant everyone could swap seats regularly and generally move about a bit. Not being on a

rigid itinerary also meant we could duck and dive up and down roads that took our fancy and stop wherever and whenever we wanted to (within reason) like veering off to Chablis for example.

This added a personal dimension that erased any boredom before it even had chance to set in. In addition, for us parents, spending so long with all of our children in such a small place was really nice.

At home, everyone spends a lot of their time in their own rooms stepping out, it seems, either to eat or to annoy one another. However, in the van, they all got on like the Von Trapp children. There were no major fallings out and, by the end, they were even buying each other presents. If you have seen the Robin Williams' film 'RV', it was a bit like that although not in such a Hollywood way obviously.



For me, I am glad we got home without any major upsets. Apart from the near miss in France and if you ignore the stress associated with trying to find and arrive at a secure site before it closed, the whole venture was a pleasure. The only downside was the weather. Although it was warm compared to the UK during the day, the night and mornings were still cold. In fact, other than in Rojales itself, we woke up to a frost everywhere. This made it pretty uncomfortable dashing to and fro the showers, but also meant that hardly anything was open. I'd be interested to do the same trip again but during the summer to see just how different it might be, but I wonder if the extra crowds might delete the extra services available?

The two pictures above show some of the Fego clan on the beach at Guardamar on Boxing Day and the exit road from the site near Bilbao (a 1 in 15). The video below is where we stayed on our second night near Ceyrat. Click <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfKgVCGIRh0> to view online.

### **And finally...**

By way of an epilogue, I thought it might be useful to summarise some of our findings and document some thoughts about our trip. So, here we go...

### **Things we learned:**

Loads. We learned loads. Some before we went, some whilst away and some after we got back. We didn't realise that there was so much to take on board (so to speak). We thought that having a tent on wheels would be as easy as just driving, parking, shopping, eating and sleeping. We were wrong.



First of all, we had to find out about travelling abroad and where to stop overnight. This involved buying books and asking people questions. Estimating mileage times between stops is an art especially when you are travelling with children and trying to have a holiday too and especially if you have no idea about the geography of your route. Not learning this before we left was a mistake I wished we knew we were making. Not taking a map and relying on sat nav to navigate was also a mistake like allowing your fuel light to come on believing there will be a garage around the next bend. We then had to learn to live with each other in a very small space for long periods of time, but that wasn't something we could really prepare for.

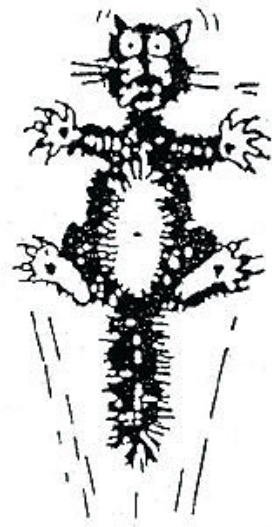


The weather was cold but dry and most places were closed. Those that were still open didn't have much in the way of facilities so the only entertainment available to us was already in the van. That involved dvd's, board games and foreign tv. Surprisingly, this was enough although before leaving we didn't think it would be.

In the few weeks leading up to our departure, I spent a huge amount of time getting prepared. I thought I had over-planned but, on reflection, I could have planned better. When travelling with children on your first trip abroad, I don't think it's actually possible to plan enough although the bits you don't or can't plan for can be dealt with through experience. For example, sleeping arrangements. I thought we had done a good job of preparing the sleeping plan but found that we had to change it at least twice whilst we were away to



accommodate changed minds. When we all go away in the summer, we'll have to change the bed arrangements again because the weather will be warmer and the nights lighter which means me and Mrs. F will probably take a wander to the local local and turn in later than the children which means them using the front of the van and us using the back. Probably. In hindsight, I just wished I had invested more time into planning the stops. If we hadn't had the children with us and had it not been winter, it might not have been such a worry, but as it was, trying to find a suitable place made for a bit of a panic rush towards the end of each travelling day. Overall, however, we just about got away with it and found somewhere safe to stop when we needed to.



As our trip progressed, we realised that there were things we thought would be essential (or should I say were told were essential) and there were things we didn't think we would need at all or just left behind. Here are a few examples:

**Things we needed but didn't take because we didn't know we needed them:**



A dustpan and brush - this was probably the thing we would have used the most. We didn't take one because we took the hand held Dyson but that was just as useless before it broke as it was after it broke (actually, after I blew it up). If we had have had a broom, that would have been almost as good because we could have removed the carpets and just swept up.

CD's - somehow, we managed to take just one CD. OK it was Christmas time, but why we only took 'Now that's what I call Christmas' is beyond me. A big mistake though because the French and Spanish radio stations are total rubbish. At one point, just one and only for 15 minutes, I treated myself to my i-pod. It was limited to 15 minutes because I forgot the charger cable and the battery went flat!

Detailed paper maps of France and Spain - we had a Tom Tom and we had AutoRoute 2007, but we didn't have a physical map of anywhere. The technology was excellent at telling us where we were and for

being told to tell us where to go next, but there were at least 20 times where a detailed paper map in the lap of the co-driver would have been really, really helpful and where it would have reduced a stress level or two. Certainly, it was difficult for me to plan our next day's driving and stop without a big map to throw open and stare at.

A submersible water pump - I refused to buy one of these before we left against the advice of several people. Mostly, this was because I couldn't be bothered to wire it up, but also because I couldn't see what was wrong with an old fashioned hosepipe. After all, all sites have a water point you just bowl up to and top up your tank, don't they? No, they bloody don't and trying to ferry freezing water into your tank handraulically is 'orrible. Even though this won't be as bad in the summer, I still think I'll look into a solution.




A fold up (or similar) portable water carrier - (see water pump above). Not having a purposely designed vessel for fetching and dispatching fluid meant relying on my enterprising side. I had to be creative twice because Mrs. F confused my first invention with junk and threw it away. Anyway, during the entire trip, the closest I could physically get the van to fresh running water was about 30 yards or to put it another way, about 20 yards further than my hose would reach. This meant having to fill and re-fill and re-fill a 5 litre water bottle and empty it into the van's water tank initially through the screw cap under the seat, but later from the outside. Using the direct approach inside the van meant having to move children who didn't want to be moved and filling up from the outside meant having to (twice) design a funnel and pour icy water over my hands and feet.

**A small set of steps** - I'm talking here about a mini stepladder, not door steps. The windows and the reversing camera got really dirty and needed cleaning a lot. A small set of steps would have been useful. Might have helped with the photography too.



**A teapot** - yep, we even forgot a teapot. We bought every type of plastic vessel, plastic plates, lightweight cutlery, sugar and teabag pots, but we forgot a teapot. So we had to make it in the (plastic) cups and after a couple of days turned to coffee instead. Tea in a plastic cup just aint tea.

**A windscreen insulation kit** - the morning's chores were dominated by the condensation removal performance. By all accounts, this could have been prevented or at least reduced had I installed insulators to the screen and windows. As it was, it wasn't that much of a chore really and I'm not sure I'll bother buying the screens now. They're only (another) 40 quid, but where do I put them during the summer?

**Sunglasses** - the sun shined. A lot. I didn't take my sunglasses. What a div. 

Spanish phrase book - somehow, we didn't have any trouble reading road signs or asking for things in France, but the second we got into Spain, we struggled. There were lots of active road signs (the ones capable of displaying any message) but we didn't have a clue what they meant and therefore how to react to them. Maybe the French have got it right by just using phrases anyone can understand and maybe the Spanish have taken a leaf out of our stupid road sign's book and were saying things to me like we display to our visitors. I mean, do foreign drivers in our country really know what we mean when we say 'Straddle nearside lanes' or 'Beware, adverse camber'? Probably not. So it wouldn't surprise me if those Spanish signs contained similarly benign messages. Either way, a little Spanish phrase book would have been a great comfort. It would have added to the fun factor too by letting us know how far off our amateur translations were.



**A reverse polarity checker** - It's a bit embarrassing now to think that I went to the trouble of creating a reverse wired connector but didn't manage to ever put myself in a position of knowing when to use it. Click [here](#) if you don't know what I mean and to see how I ruined the hoover as a result.

**Currency** - I didn't take enough cash and was surprised by the number of places in France and Spain that do not accept credit cards. Even the largest and most expensive well equipped site insisted on cash which I had luckily topped up the day before.

### **Things we took but didn't need:**

The reversed polarity connector lead - David from Heartbeat would have been proud of me here. It's a bit like building a dart board and forgetting to buy any darts but then still organising to host an episode of 'Bullseye'. I suppose I was hoping that each campsite would tell me

if the power was reversed or not so I could select the appropriate connector.

**Levelling Ramps** - I had a small spirit level so I kept shuffling the van around until I was happy that it was level enough. I didn't need to use them therefore. Thank god.

**Toolkit** - I didn't need to do any maintenance and therefore the toolkit I had put together was redundant. Shame, it would have impressed the 'Snap-on' man that would. It's one of those Pandora Box type with a torch on the outside and millions of spanners, screwdrivers and all sorts of useful apparatus inside yet still small enough to jam behind the driver's seat. I was desperate to whip it out really.

### **Things that surprised us:**

**Finding appropriate places to stop** - we found it very difficult to actually find places to stop overnight during our drive down to Spain. I don't mean in terms of directions, but in terms of actually identifying them. Where are they all? I spent a lot of time planning my route but I thought that any further investment to find, phone and book every stop before leaving would have squandered valuable time I didn't have. It would also have prevented any flexibility for our plans. Apart from two stops, we therefore had to try to find places en route.

This was a stressful challenge which wasn't made any easier by the inaccurate information stored in the unreadable guide books. We were lucky in the end so I guess it worked out ok. No one died. However, the combination of our ignorance and the low season meant most places were very closed and those that were open were expensive, out of the way and difficult to find. They were also empty of features and resources making them nothing more than lavish car parks and not really part of the holiday we thought they would be.

**Sites' pricing structures** - every business has to earn its dollar, granted. But I'm befuddled by the basis on which the camping parks release wedge from their ever changing guests. For example, not one single site we stayed at had a 'low season' tariff yet they were all quick to justify the lack of available services as due to the low season. Secondly, they all charge a basic rate for the 'van then add a fixed price per person on board. If this charging structure was based on fact, then I'd



have to principally report that in France and Spain children become adults when they reach about ten. In some parishes, children suddenly become adults when they are only 6 which is a brilliant result for campsites because it means they can charge these vernal adults full whack years earlier than they could in the UK. There was one rare exception when our children were still classed as children until they were 16 which meant they (me on their behalf) enjoyed the benefit of the child rate which was a whopping 75 cent less than the adult rate. So, to set the waffle aside and sum up, the French and Spanish sites we stayed at charged high season rates for low season services, charged per person not per unit and selfishly class children as adults like Hannibal classes people as dinner courses.

**The Van itself** - the performance of the van was astounding both on the road and inside. Absolutely perfect for a family of 6 and absolutely no problems with it at all. The lights didn't play up like they did after initial delivery and the funny oil smell went away too. If I was really picky, I could complain that the blackout blinds don't come down far enough letting sunlight in a bit earlier than I would have sometimes liked, but I guess there's a reason and a cure for that.

**Damage to the van** - I was surprised when I got back and washed the van (took me four hours!) and noticed three pressure dents on the roof. They definitely weren't there when we left the UK and I've no recollection of hitting anything low so have no idea how they happened.

**Wavy Camper Crew** - I said before that I wasn't sure what the form was in relation to waving to other campervans. Do you/don't you? What if you do and they don't or they do and you don't? Creates an uncomfortable, awkward post wave moment that does. We were surprised to find that most drivers on the continent either completely ignored us or (if I am being benevolent) probably didn't see us or maybe thought we were trying to point to a fault with their van when we started wobbling our wrists high in the air as they approached us from the other side of the carriageway. So we did a survey as we went and took a mental note of who did and who didn't wave and what nation they were from.



The survey wasn't very comprehensive because we only saw about 30 vans the entire time, but what was clear was that the Germans never

waved. Even when a return wave was seemingly unavoidable, we failed to extract a single stroke of the hand making us, staggeringly, more unsuccessful than the English Ashes tour. We saw 2 English vans whose occupants gladly contributed to the wave if you're English and don't know why you're waving appeal and so did a couple of Danishhhh vans.

The rest and therefore the majority didn't want to be noticed, or, if they did, they didn't want to wave or be waved to. I'm not sure if the ignorance matters or not really w probably looked as out of place as a dolphin at a Rodeo actually, but so what? we were only being friendly. We thought it was polite to recognise another member of the MH fraternity so felt obliged to gesture, especially as we were told that was normal.

**Free information** - we were surprised by the availability of information freely distributed by members of a MH website and readers of this blog. We have been helped so much by so many people we have never met or even spoken to before way beyond anything we expected. Most of the tips and help has been voluntarily proffered in an email, but where I've needed to know the answer to a question, I've had an answer within minutes on the [MotorHomesFacts website](#). I'm not sure if there are any other similar resources to this website out there because I haven't needed to look, but I am very grateful for the advice, some of which really, really helped us on this trip and some of which helped us generally.



### **Final thoughts...**

We had a great time in our van and on our holiday. It was a fantastic adventure from the moment we first collected the van to the day we got on the ferry to the day we got home. There were very few scary or stressful moments but several hundred happy moments. On the down side, Christmas wasn't the same and you can't exactly say we chilled out like you would on a beach holiday. But the change was as good as if not better than a rest. The fact we were complete novices never once put us off, it just added to the challenge and made things more interesting really. Anyone wary of taking to the Continent needn't worry at all. If you can drive, stop, get level, keep warm, get fed, be entertained and sleep in your van in the UK, then you can do it in France and Spain. Believe me, I just did it.



Someone asked me the other day what the best bit was, so I told him that the best bit is that our van is still sitting out there on the drive waiting for us to take it on our next trip...

This is the final entry of this blog and below is the final video. Crank up the volume for best effect:

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-6297729777608485738&hl=en>

### **Our photo and video library...**



I have created a photo library of our trip. I did upload a lot more videos, but they took a long, long time to load to view so now there are only photos there. I'll see what I can do about the films, but in the meantime, please have a look at the pictures. The album should be very easy to use. There is even a slide show there so you don't have to actually do any clicking. Ideal for when you get stuck on the phone. Please click on the thumbnail picture or [here](#) to see the pictures. Or, if you have a Google account and want to see the same album but through Google's tool, please click the image to the right. Or use:



<http://www1.freewebs.com/fego/album/index.html>

and

<http://picasaweb.google.com/kfegan/PhotoAlbumForFegoSRoadtripToSpainChristmas2006>

And, finally, here are some videos...

[http://ia310934.us.archive.org/1/items/FegountitledTestingJanMOV/Testing\\_Jan.MOV](http://ia310934.us.archive.org/1/items/FegountitledTestingJanMOV/Testing_Jan.MOV) This is us near Alicante. Please note: this is a large file and will take a bit of time to download.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehv1TU\\_ljds](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehv1TU_ljds) This was us leaving another toll booth to enter another tunnel.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLkljyaAYOM> This is a quick look at Chablis.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6G8w0WRA--4> A bit more of Spain.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCpxtD6QqdE> And some more of Spain, in the Rioja wine region.